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ERNEST RENAN'S RACE PROBLEM*

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ABSTRACT. *This review revisits the role of race in Ernest Renan's thought by situating contemporary debates in a long perspective that extends back to his texts and their earliest interpreters. Renan is an ambivalent figure: from the 1850s onwards he used 'race' to denote firm differences between the 'Aryan' and 'Semitic' language groups in history; but after 1870, he repeatedly condemned biological racism in various venues and contexts. I show that the tension between these two sides of Renan's thought has continually resurfaced in criticism and historiography ever since the late nineteenth century. Renan's racial views have been subject to particularly close scrutiny following Léon Poliakov's and Edward Said's critiques in the 1970s, but the ensuing debate risks developing into an inconclusive tug-of-war between attack and apologia. I propose three fresh directions for research. First, historians should situate the evolution of Renan's ideas on race in closer biographical context; secondly, they must reconsider the cultural authority of his texts, which is often more asserted than proven; thirdly, they should pay greater attention to his reception outside Europe, particularly regarding his writing on Islam.*

I would like to distinguish between the Renan of legend and the Renan of reality.
Émile Zola (1878)[1]

The winter of 2009–10 greeted the English translations of two books from Israel that offered entirely contradictory visions of Ernest Renan's significance to the history of European racial thought. In his expansive study, *The anti-Enlightenment tradition*, the venerable historian Zeev Sternhell sought to defend the claims of Enlightenment universalism against its historical enemies. Renan featured here as a founding father of modern biological racism whose anti-democratic doctrines foreshadowed and indirectly germinated the horrors of the twentieth century.[2] According to this interpretation, which the 'liberal Zionist'

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[1] Émile Zola, 'Lettre à la jeunesse', in *Le roman expérimental* (5th edn, Paris, 1881), p. 69.

[2] Zeev Sternhell, *The anti-Enlightenment tradition*, trans. David Maisel (London, 2010); originally, *Les anti-Lumières: du XVIII^e siècle à la guerre froide* (Paris, 2006).

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Sternhell had developed across his previous historical works on the French Right and political essays on Israel, Renan's 'clear anti-Semitic bias' formed a central plank in the parallel nineteenth-century developments of modern anti-Semitism and Zionism.[3] By contrast, Shlomo Sand's *The invention of the Jewish people*, a contentious bestseller which sought to dismantle the 'myth' of Jewish racial essentialism, lauded Renan as 'the Jean-Paul Sartre' of the late nineteenth century.[4] A self-professed 'post-Zionist', Sand praised Renan's outspoken support of the Jews and celebrated his cultural definition of nationality as a vital weapon in the fight against the shared biological prejudices of anti-Semitism and Zionism. He subsequently edited a Hebrew translation of two of Renan's major essays, which Verso then released in English.[5]

Such a stark disagreement over the racial views of a major writer born nearly two centuries ago is startling. It is difficult not to feel sympathetic for the readers of these and other recent books, who might be left posing a deceptively simple question: what did Renan really think about race? Confused twenty-first-century students might take some comfort in knowing that the cauldron of contradictory views on the subject is as old as modern anti-Semitism itself. In his notorious late-nineteenth-century screed *La France juive*, for example, the anti-Semite Édouard Drumont enthusiastically cited Renan's pronouncements on racial determinism while writing of his 'invincible repugnance' for the historian's scholarly acquaintances and religious beliefs.[6] To Drumont, Renan was both a pioneering race theorist and an anti-Catholic, money-grubbing friend of the Jews. Renan's best-selling *Vie de Jésus*, which denied Christ's divinity, had been published by the Jewish Lévy brothers, while he rubbed shoulders with modern 'deicides' like the Rothschilds at the Société des Études Juives.

Although the intellectual and political alliances surrounding Renan's legacy are often unexpected, Drumont's decision to separate Renan's texts from his acts indicates that the major axes of disagreement are not. They concern certain perennial questions in intellectual history: the relative weight of biographical and textual material in determining a writer's intentions, the comparative significance of his individual texts, and the level of consistency across his body of work. By situating recent attempts to classify Renan in a longer debate which extends from the Dreyfus Affair, across the two World Wars, and through the twists of the linguistic turn, this review will demonstrate the remarkable durability of divisions over his racial thought. It argues that

[3] Zeev Sternhell, 'In defence of liberal Zionism', *New Left Review*, 62 (Mar.–Apr. 2010), p. 105.

[4] Shlomo Sand, *The invention of the Jewish people* (London, 2009), p. 269. The comparison would not have flattered Sartre, who quipped that '[Renan's] "beautiful style" offers all desirable examples of baseness and ugliness': *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris, 1964), p. 150.

[5] Ernest Renan, *On the nation and the 'Jewish people'*, ed. Shlomo Sand and trans. David Fernbach (London, 2010). I am grateful to Ben Walker for this reference.

[6] Édouard Drumont, *La France juive: essai d'histoire contemporaine* (2nd edn, 2 vols., Paris, 1887), I, p. 16, see pp. 12–16, 137–8 more generally.

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historians should resist the overarching narratives and teleological assumptions that have structured previous analyses; they should instead pay closer attention to the generation of Renan's work and its reception among a range of contemporary and posthumous audiences.

I

Renan's life and texts must be the starting point for any discussion of his racial ideas. Born in the Breton town of Tréguier in 1823, Renan achieved all of the major accolades in French academic life. By his death in 1892, he was a Grand Officer in the Legion of Honour, member of the Académie Française and Administrator of the Collège de France. More than just a successful scholar, Renan was a major public figure whose books sold far beyond the academy and found audiences throughout Europe and the Americas. He was also a politically charged figure who became one of the major anathemas of fin-de-siècle French Catholic writing, and a man whose memory was so dear to republican governments that they not only accorded him a state funeral and a statue but even, in 1906, named a battle cruiser after him.[7]

Renan had begun adulthood as a devout Catholic. He originally moved from Brittany to Paris in 1838 on a seminary scholarship, and subsequently studied at the celebrated Seminary of Saint-Sulpice. Renan left the seminary in 1845 after struggling to reconcile his critical view on the Bible with his duties to the Catholic church. His subsequent, illustrious career in secular academia was founded on his expertise in Semitic languages. His two major works: the eight-volume *Histoire des origines du christianisme* (1863–81) and five-volume *Histoire du peuple d'Israël* (1887–94, finished posthumously) retold the histories of Christianity and Judaism, respectively. Alongside these mammoth projects, he initiated a major anthology of Semitic inscriptions (the *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*, 1867–81), penned a well-loved memoir of his religious youth (*Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse*, 1883), and produced a wide variety of shorter works of which the best known today is his lecture 'Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?' (1882).[8]

Driven by Renan's engaging prose style, many of these works became well known among educated French readers. *Vie de Jésus* was translated into dozens of European languages, and generated a widespread academic and popular sensation.[9] Nonetheless, the focus of much work on Renan's concept

[7] For a striking example of the persistence of Catholic animosity towards Renan's name, see Paul Claudel's letter to Henriette Psichari, 7 July 1932, cited in Henriette Psichari, *Des jours et des hommes (1890–1961)* (Paris, 1962), pp. 143–4; for the funeral speeches, see the supplement ('Les obsèques de M. Ernest Renan') to *Le Temps*, 8 Oct. 1892; the ship was the 'Croiseur-cuirassé Ernest Renan', in service 1908–36.

[8] With the exception of the *Corpus*, all of these works are available in Renan, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Henriette Psichari (10 vols., Paris, 1947–61) (hereafter *OC*).

[9] Alan Pitt, 'The cultural impact of science in France: Ernest Renan and the *Vie de Jésus*', *Historical Journal*, 43 (2000), pp. 79–101; Robert D. Priest, 'Reading, writing, and religion in

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of race is his first book, a dense academic monograph on Semitic languages: the *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques* (1855). This study announced Renan's arrival on the European philological scene. It drew on the major finding of comparative philology: that the Indo-European and Semitic language families were fundamentally distinct. Although Renan's encyclopaedic ambitions consciously echoed the works of great German philologists such as Franz Bopp, he took philological reasoning further than many of his contemporaries dared.

To the Renan of 1855, linguistic families engendered discrete races. He had read Johann Gottfried von Herder as a young man and was captivated by his argument that language structured thought.[10] Renan believed that the linguistic divergences uncovered by modern philology must simultaneously reflect and shape fundamental ethnic differences between human groups. Extrapolating from the supposed inflexibility and antiquity of their languages, he argued that the Semites: developed notions of prophecy and revelation, but lacked curiosity and displayed no analytical spirit; were devoid of creative imagination; lacked nuance; were unable to laugh; had no plastic arts or mythology; lacked complex politics and military discipline; and, finally, had an entirely individualistic notion of morality that made them incapable of disinterested judgement. Their original contribution to the progress of humanity was nonetheless of unparalleled importance: they had invented monotheism, the basis of all true religion.[11]

Even in this, Renan's most rigid description of the Semitic race, he was keen to resist any biological explanation of these differences: 'The study of languages and religions alone has allowed us to recognize a distinction that the study of the body did not reveal.'[12] He also acknowledged that, despite their enormous importance, linguistic differences could only explain so much: the 'great force' of 'civilization' eroded and levelled discrete cultures in the modern world. Many of 'today's Israelites' therefore retained 'nothing of the Semitic character'; they were simply 'modern men'.[13] Race in the *Histoire générale* was, in other words, a somewhat heuristic device. It only applied to 'pure Semites': those original tribes who had been isolated from foreign influence and industrial modernity.[14] This conception of race, as an 'immense' original force whose influence dramatically faded in advanced civilizations, underpinned the young Renan's polite refusal to review Arthur de Gobineau's notorious

nineteenth-century France: the popular reception of Renan's *Life of Jesus*', *Journal of Modern History*, 86 (2014), pp. 258–94.

[10] See Renan's seminary notes on German literature, *Travaux et jours d'un séminariste en vacances (Bretagne 1845)*, ed. Jean Pommier (Cahiers renaniens, no. 2, Paris, 1972).

[11] *OC*, VIII, pp. 146–55.

[12] *OC*, VIII, p. 577.

[13] *OC*, VIII, p. 139.

[14] *OC*, VIII, p. 140.

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Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines (1853). Renan found Gobineau's unbending biological determinism and morbid fear of miscegenation dubious.[15]

Renan's historical works on the biblical Jews provided the application of his linguistic determinism. His controversial inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in February 1862 reiterated that, in their purest form (now represented by Muslims), Semites and Europeans were 'like two beings from different species'.[16] Christianity was, nonetheless, the confluence of two 'rivers', one Semitic and the other Indo-European, which had converged in Jesus. Renan stridently proclaimed: 'although we owe nothing to the Semites in our political life, nor our art, nor our poetry, nor our philosophy, nor our science,' their 'providential mission' had been to give the world pure religion.[17] The following year's *Vie de Jésus* accordingly portrayed its subject as an ethnically Jewish product of first-century Messianic thought, but one whose 'northern' Galilean origins contrasted with the 'eastern' Pharisaic temperament of Jerusalem. Like Luther or Rousseau, Jesus was both a product of and reaction to 'his century and his race'.[18] Similar arguments guided Renan's later work. The *Histoire du peuple d'Israël*, for example, repeatedly insisted on the inherent monotheism of the early Hebrews (in the face of growing archaeological evidence to the contrary).[19]

Scholars typically see the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War on 12 July 1870 as a turning point in Renan's thought. Simultaneously a Germanophile and a French patriot, Renan was horrified by the Prussian annexation of Alsace-Lorraine. During autumn 1870, he entered into a public dialogue over the war with David Friedrich Strauss, who was best known for the critical life of Jesus he had published in 1835, and reissued in a popular edition in 1864.[20] Renan, who had drawn heavily on Strauss's work, was appalled to find him vigorously defending the new German state's expansive borders.[21] In a celebrated phrase which asserted the superiority of cultural identity to biological racism, Renan declared: 'Ours is the politics of the right of nations; yours is the politics of race. The division of humanity into races … can only lead to wars of extermination, to "zoological" wars.'[22] The cultural definition of

[15] The fusion of races was, after all, a somewhat positive development for Renan, since it bequeathed Christianity. See the letters in *OC*, x, pp. 159–61 (19 Aug. 1854), 203–5 (26 June 1856); quotation p. 204.

[16] *OC*, II, p. 323.

[17] *OC*, II, p. 328.

[18] *OC*, IV, p. 369.

[19] E.g. *OC*, VI, pp. 46–67.

[20] David Friedrich Strauss, *The life of Jesus critically examined*, trans. Mary Ann Evans (London, 1898); originally *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (Tübingen, 1835); idem, *Das Leben Jesu für das Deutsche Volk bearbeitet* (Leipzig, 1864).

[21] Renan's letters originally appeared in the *Journal des débats*, Strauss's in the *Allgemeine Zeitung* (Augsburg). They were republished as an appendix to *La réforme intellectuelle et morale*, in *OC*, I, pp. 437–63.

[22] *OC*, I, p. 456.

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nationhood that Renan developed in these letters ultimately came to fruition in 1882 as 'Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?' This lecture's definition of the nation as a 'daily plebiscite', grounded in a mixture of memory and amnesia, is familiar to many of today's undergraduates thanks to Benedict Anderson and other late-twentieth-century theorists of nationalism.[23] It likely also owed an unacknowledged debt to the *Völkerpsychologie* pioneer Moritz Lazarus, who had offered a similarly voluntaristic definition of the nation in 1880, largely in defence of Germany's Jews.[24]

Renan's moderation of his strident early language on the Semites came to an apotheosis with two lectures in 1883. In 'Le judaïsme comme race et comme religion' on 27 January, he asserted that while Judaism had 'initially represented a particular race's tradition', a long history of racial mixing subsequently made any 'ethnographic' definition of the Jewish race in the modern world absurd.[25] Sand, whose broader project is to demonstrate that the Jewish race has no biological reality, includes this lecture in his new volume. On 26 May 1883, Renan also gave the annual lecture for the Société des Études Juives, presided over by Alphonse de Rothschild. Here, Renan argued that Judaism and Christianity were intimately related branches of a common religious family with a shared history.[26] Renan lauded the Bible as a Jewish invention that had both united East and West and formed the doctrine of equal rights, which the French Revolution had consummated through the emancipation of the Jews.[27] While 'every Jew' was 'a liberal by nature (*par essence*)', their enemies were 'generally enemies of the modern spirit'.[28] Newspaper reports on the lecture wondered whether Renan was being earnest, or if he had tried too hard to 'caress and flatter' his Jewish audience. His sentiments were certainly more reconciliatory than his historical works, which usually emphasized Christianity's severance from its Jewish origins.[29]

Another use of 'race', however, persisted across Renan's career. The *Histoire générale* had acknowledged that the Semites and Aryans were physiologically 'one race, the white race' and intellectually 'one family, the civilized family'.[30] When it came to those who fell outside this turbulent family, his approach was less equivocal. In the aftermath of the revolutions of 1848, the

[23] *OC*, I, pp. 887–906; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (2nd edn, London, 2006), pp. xiv, 6, 199–203; as Pierre Birnbaum notes, 'daily plebiscite' is now a buzzword: 'Le retour d'Ernest Renan', *Critique*, 697–8 (June–July 2005), pp. 518–23.

[24] Moritz Lazarus, *Was heißt national?* (Berlin, 1880); on this, Egbert Klautke, 'The French reception of Völkerpsychologie and the origins of the social sciences', *Modern Intellectual History*, 10 (Aug. 2013), pp. 306–7.

[25] *OC*, I, pp. 941–2.

[26] *OC*, I, p. 909.

[27] *OC*, I, p. 921.

[28] *OC*, I, p. 922.

[29] *Le Temps*, 28 May 1883.

[30] *OC*, VIII, p. 577.

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youthful treatise *L'Avenir de la science* had resorted to the patriarchal language of the European civilizing mission: it argued that liberty could not be extended to 'savage races' like black Africans without first educating them.[31] Similarly, *La réforme intellectuelle et morale*, his anti-democratic manifesto in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War, made the case for European colonialism as a 'political necessity of the absolutely highest order'. There was nothing wrong with Europeans – a 'race of soldiers' (that did not explicitly exclude Semites) – conquering 'inferior races' such as the Chinese, a race gifted with 'marvellous manual dexterity [but] lacking almost any sense of honour', and especially 'negroes', 'a race of tillers of the soil' (*travailleurs de la terre*).[32] Equally, when he belatedly published *L'Avenir de la science* in 1890, Renan regretted that it had not formed 'a sufficiently clear idea of the inequality of races'. The sixty-seven-year-old felt his younger self had granted too much to human agency, when each race's 'more or less honourable' place in human progress was largely predestined.[33] When Renan discussed non-Europeans, in other words, there was much more chauvinistic continuity than in his views on the Semites.

Renan's texts have ultimately left an ambiguous legacy. His insistence on attaching the categories 'Aryan' and 'Semite' to a rigidly deterministic system was deeply inauspicious. Future writers often lacked his qualms about attributing the supposed differences between these groups to physiology. Taken at his own word in the later part of his career, however, Renan was an enemy of biological racism and a celebrant of the Jewish contribution to humanity. Yet while his work on the Semites has attracted the most attention because of its purportedly academic basis, Renan's occasional comments about other groups were if anything more sweeping and certainly much less reflective. While we can be sure that Renan was unashamed about European supremacy, the nuances of his racial language have proved both frustrating and increasingly divisive.

II

Renan died too soon to join nineteenth-century France's most dramatic conflict over anti-Semitism – the Dreyfus Affair – but his ambiguous reputation played a role in the vehement debates of the fin-de-siècle. Many anti-Dreyfusards were, like Drumont, simultaneously fascinated by Renan's writing and repelled by his religious views and republican associations. Virulent anti-Semites like Maurice Barrès and Jules Soury, a former student on Renan's Hebrew course, incorporated his arguments about the Aryan/Semite divide into their broader racist ideology. They almost exclusively cited his early work. Barrès called the *Histoire générale* 'Renan's best book' and dismissed his later history

[31] *OC*, III, p. 1033.
[32] *OC*, I, p. 390.
[33] *OC*, III, p. 723.

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of the Jews as a 'hodgepodge' (*fatras*) unworthy of publication.[34] By lavishing so much attention on the Semites, Renan had contributed to 'the triumph of the Jews' in France.[35] Soury went further, fusing his anti-Semitic bitterness with evolutionary biology into an explicitly physiological brand of racism that left Renan's writings far behind.[36]

By contrast, many leading Dreyfusards felt a deep personal or professional attachment to the late Renan; not least his descendants. His granddaughter Henriette Psichari recalled the family's total consumption by the Dreyfusard campaign in the late 1890s.[37] The Psicharis never doubted that their famous ancestor would have been a Dreyfusard. As Christophe Charle has demonstrated, Renan sat alongside Émile Zola and Anatole France as one of the handful of significant 'names' that Dreyfusards evoked in debate.[38] While alive, Renan had been connected with and admired by men who subsequently became prominent activists, such as the pioneering Protestant historian Gabriel Monod and the philosopher Gabriel Séailles.[39] The writer Camille Mauclair spoke for many of his Dreyfusard comrades when he asserted that 'Renan would have signed between Séailles and [Ferdinand] Buisson' in the 'Manifesto of the Intellectuals' which followed Zola's famous 'J'Accuse!' in 1898.[40] None of these figures saw a contradiction between their Dreyfusard allegiances and Renan's ethnic determinism.

In other words, there were already two fundamentally incompatible 'Renans' in circulation by the turn of the twentieth century. The right's Renan was a racialist visionary behind the *Histoire générale* and anti-democratic ideologue of *La réforme intellectuelle et morale*; the left's Renan was a daring anti-clerical who wrote *Vie de Jésus* and valiant cosmopolitan of the 1880s lectures. These divergent interpretations rested to some extent on different focal points in Renan's texts; a work like *Vie de Jésus* could even fit into either interpretation. Disagreement also hinged to some extent on memories of Renan's life, where he had openly collaborated with Jewish scholars. Certainly around 1900, the left's Renan was dominant: his most unambiguous supporters seemed to be the anti-clerical republicans who erected a statue to Renan in Tréguier in

[34] Maurice Barrès, *Mes cahiers* (14 vols., Paris, 1929–57), I, p. 74; see also II, pp. 119–20 (more praise for the *Histoire générale*); on this link, Zeev Sternhell, *Maurice Barrès et le nationalisme français* (2nd edn, Paris, 2000), pp. 264–7.

[35] Barrès, *Mes cahiers*, VIII, pp. 218–19.

[36] Jules Soury, *Campagne nationaliste, 1894–1901* (Paris, 1902); see Ruth Harris, *The man on Devil's Island: Alfred Dreyfus and the affair that divided France* (London, 2010), ch. 10.

[37] Psichari, *Des jours et des hommes*, pp. 44–8, ch. 3 more generally.

[38] Christophe Charle, *Naissance des 'intellectuels' 1880–1900* (Paris, 1990), pp. 152–3.

[39] See Rémy Rioux, '"Saint-Monod-la-critique" et l'"obsédante affaire Dreyfus"', *Mil neuf cent*, 11 (1993), pp. 33–8; Gabriel Séailles, *Ernest Renan: essai de biographie psychologique* (2nd edn, Paris, 1923), originally published 1896.

[40] Camille Mauclair, 'L'Université courageuse', *Aurore* (11 Dec. 1898), cited in Charle, *Naissance*, p. 153 n. 20.

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1903 as a celebration of free-thought.[41] It took an anti-Dreyfusard, Ferdinand Brunetière, to recognize the contradiction. He reminded the self-declared defenders of human rights that Renan provided the intellectual basis for Drumont's racism: 'As a linguist, or as an ethnographer, [Renan] claimed to transform the differences which separate Aryan and Semite into fundamental and implacable oppositions, incompatibilities and hostilities.'[42]

After the First World War, as the French left's focus shifted from secularism to socialism, Renan's anti-clerical cachet seemed less relevant. His name now more often attracted men of the right; yet, crucially, they almost exclusively cited his anti-democratic politics rather than his racial views. The man-of-letters Henri Massis had a horrified fascination with Renan, whom he accused of turning science into a dogma; his criticism led the right-wing aesthete Jacques Boulenger to defend Renan's politics, morality, and literary ability.[43] Charles Maurras, leader of the far-right Action Française, had attended one of Renan's lectures as an eager seventeen-year-old arrival in Paris. He admired in Renan: 'his critique of the ideas and men of the Revolution, his censure of democracy, [and] his history of France'.[44] The Catholic philosopher Jean Guitton followed with a notably sympathetic appraisal of Renan's moral and religious views in 1938.[45] During the 1940s, all of these men entered into a relationship with the Vichy regime: Massis served on the National Council and Boulenger wrote anti-Semitic pamphlets, while Guitton and Maurras both initially supported Marshal Pétain's National Revolution.[46] What is striking about their appraisals of Renan is that, despite the prevalence of racism in right-wing politics during the 1930s and 1940s, they virtually ignored his pronouncements on the Semites. Interwar critics of all political allegiances preferred to focus on Renan's moral, political, and spiritual works, rather than his historical and philological studies.[47]

It should be noted that some European Jews recognized Renan's ambivalent legacy even at this stage. A 1936 article in the *Revue juive de Genève* foreshadowed the post-war debate by opening with the question of whether Renan was a friend

[41] See *Cahier de l'inauguration du monument de Renan à Tréguier le dimanche treize septembre dix-neuf cent trois* (Cahiers de la quinzaine, vol. 5, Paris, 1903).

[42] Ferdinand Brunetière, *Cinq lettres sur Ernest Renan* (2nd edn, Paris, 1904), p. 67. For Brunetière's complexities, see Antoine Compagnon's remarkable study, *Connaissez-vous Brunetière? enquête sur un antidreyfusard et ses amis* (Paris, 1997).

[43] Henri Massis, *Jugements I: Renan, France, Barrès* (Paris, 1923); Jacques Boulenger, *Renan et ses critiques* (Paris, 1925).

[44] Charles Maurras, 'Portrait de M. Renan', *Action Française* (21 Apr. 1932); republished as a pamphlet, *Portrait de M. Renan* (Paris, 1932).

[45] Jean Guitton, *Profils parallèles* (Paris, 1970), ch. 2; originally, *La pensée moderne et le catholicisme: parallèles: Renan et Newman* (Aix-en-Provence, 1938).

[46] Jacques Boulenger, *Le sang français* (Paris, 1943).

[47] Likewise, the idiosyncratic Julien Benda, *Le trahison des clercs* (Paris, 1928), pp. 9–10, 91, 247.

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or foe of the Jews.[48] While excusing him of personal anti-Semitism, the piece indicted Renan, above all, for the irresponsibility of his contradictions. His levity with the concept of race now had real consequences: 'No real harm would have come if these charming digressions had delighted only [Renan]. Today, duly germanized, they form the Nazi gospel.'[49] Yet during the 1940s, Renan's more reconciliatory works proved politically useful for French leftists and Jewish refugees. Exiled in New York, the ageing Dreyfusard Émile Buré edited a collection of Renan's writings against Germany's racial nationalism. He cited the January 1883 lecture on the Jews as conclusive proof that Hitler and Pétain would have 'disgusted' Renan.[50] In the same city in 1943, both a workers' education organization and the American Jewish Committee reprinted Renan's lectures as anti-Nazi propaganda.[51]

III

Following the Second World War, two related intellectual currents redirected historiographical attention towards Renan's racial views. The first was the effort by historians and intellectuals to excavate the intellectual foundations of the Nazi genocide. Hannah Arendt's initial, seminal contribution, *The origins of totalitarianism*, granted Renan a pregnant but parenthetical judgement: he was 'probably the first' European decisively to oppose Aryan and Semite, even if he had acknowledged the levelling force of civilization.[52] The literary critic Kurt Weinberg noticed Arendt's comment and subsequently published a study of Renan's uses of 'race'. Although rarely cited, Weinberg's essay remains one of the most sensitive treatments of the subject. He recognized Renan's variable application of the concept when discussing different sorts of 'race', such as the Celts, the Semites, or the Chinese. Weinberg also highlighted the contradictions between Renan's apparently prescriptive language and actually uninhibited digressions in almost every application of the term.[53]

The book which conclusively changed the direction of literature on Renan was the French historian Léon Poliakov's 1971 investigation into the origins of the 'Aryan myth'. Poliakov aimed to show that the heritage of European racism was not confined to marginal figures such as Arthur de Gobineau but

[48] Alexandre Hérenger, 'Renan et les Juifs', *La Revue juive de Genève*, 37 (Apr. 1936), pp. 315–25.

[49] Ibid.,p. 325.

[50] Émile Buré, *Ernest Renan et l'Allemagne* (New York, NY, 1945), p. 35.

[51] Ernest Renan, *Le judaïsme comme race et comme religion* (New York, NY, 1943), from the Rand School of Social Science; Ernest Renan, 'Identité originelle et séparation graduelle du judaïsme et du christianisme', ed. Robert Pick, *Contemporary Jewish Record*, 6 (1943), pp. 436–48. On the latter, Shlomo Sand, 'The unclassifiable Renan', in *On the nation*, p. 29.

[52] Hannah Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism* (New York, NY, 1958), p. 174; originally, *The burden of our time* (London, 1951).

[53] Kurt Weinberg, '"Race" et "races" dans l'œuvre d'Ernest Renan', *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur*, 68 (1958), pp. 129–64.

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had rather been a mainstream, broad-based ideology. In this connection, Poliakov cited Renan as 'the chief sponsor of the Aryan myth in France' and argued that, although he struck a more cautious tone on racial determinism after the Franco-Prussian War, Renan's early ideas nonetheless spread widely in European scholarly culture.[54] Similarly, the great German-born historian George Mosse situated Renan in a lineage of nineteenth-century thinkers on Christianity who had tried to free the religion from its Jewish origins by minimizing its debt to the Old Testament. While noting that Renan viewed modern Jews as 'no longer handicapped by their past', Mosse argued that his writing on historical Jews nonetheless marked a point on the path from a linguistic racism that dealt in ideal types to a twentieth-century racism that judged contemporary social groups.[55]

In such wide-ranging works as Mosse's and Poliakov's, the devotion of subsections to the analysis of Renan's racial thought signalled a significant historiographical reorientation. In particular, their decision to highlight Renan's cultural-linguistic determinism alongside and even above the more explicitly biological thinking of his contemporary Gobineau represented a widening of the lens of the historiography of European racism. Historians now looked beyond the obvious spokesmen of political anti-Semitism to consider the deeper roots of ideas of racial inequality in modern European culture.

The second intellectual current flowed from the work of Michel Foucault, especially *Les mots et les choses* (1966; translated as *The order of things* in 1970). In his effort to reveal the 'subterranean levels' of the modern consciousness through an investigation into the origins of the human sciences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Foucault firmly situated philology alongside the biological and social sciences as a key development that revolutionized human understandings of culture.[56] In this new frame, Renan's obscure and dusty scholarly discipline became a vital reservoir of modernity.

Foucault's historical philosophy was fundamental for Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the book which has probably had the largest effect on Renan scholarship in English. Like Mosse and Poliakov, Said highlighted the role of the academic disciplines in Europe's history of domination and racism, with particular attention to European travellers and scholars, of which Renan was both. Ranging across Renan's scholarly output, Said positioned Renan as a key personality who, through the authority of philology, helped translate the new forms of Orientalism into European educated culture. Renan exemplified the

[54] Léon Poliakov, *The Aryan myth: a history of racist and nationalist ideas in Europe*, trans. Edmund Howard (London, 1977), p. 206, and pp. 206–9 more generally; originally, *Le mythe aryen, essai sur les sources du racisme et des nationalismes* (Paris, 1971).

[55] George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: a history of European racism* (London, 1978), pp. 129–30, quotation from p. 130.

[56] Michel Foucault, *The order of things: an archaeology of the human sciences* (London, 2001), ch. 8; originally, *Les mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris, 1966).

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European scholar who used knowledge about the Oriental other as a form of domination:

> Semitic was Renan's first creation, a fiction invented by him in the philological laboratory to satisfy his sense of public place and mission. It should by no means be lost on us that Semitic was for Renan's ego the symbol of European (and consequently his) dominion over the Orient and over his own era.[57]

To Said, it did not matter whether Renan's comparative assessments originated in 'ethnocentric race prejudice' or 'scholarly necessity', the point was that the two motivations were mutually complementary.[58] Oriental philology was the scientific scaffolding for a larger cultural edifice that reinforced the unequal relationship between West and East.

Though *Orientalism* has been available in French since 1980, the historian Maurice Olender and critic Tzvetan Todorov had a heavier impact on Renan's image in Francophone historiography. Their investigations into European racial thinking both appeared in French in 1989 and then English in 1992.[59] Olender's *Languages of paradise* built on Foucault's interpretation of nineteenth-century philology to explore the complex of spiritual and scholarly impulses behind the discipline's conceptions of racial and linguistic difference. Here, Renan sat between Herder and the Anglo-German philologist Max Müller on the path to Aryanism. While Olender was careful to insist that Renan's contradictory and inconsistent texts resist generalization, he argued that it was nonetheless possible to discern a consistent ideology of racial inequality across his work. Wherever Renan refuted the determinant role of race in one context, the displaced prejudice would appear in another. After the Franco-Prussian War, for example, Renan argued in one breath that European nations cannot and should not be defined along 'zoological' lines, but in the next that Europeans should necessarily subjugate inherently inferior African and Asian peoples.[60] Although it focused less specifically on philology, Todorov's *On human diversity* told a similar story about Renan's centrality to the history of racial inequality in French thought.[61] While acknowledging the inconsistency of Renan's thought, Todorov argued that his ideas on race and nation never fully escaped the trap of a form of ethnic determinism.[62]

[57] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London, 2003), p. 141.

[58] Ibid., pp. 149–50.

[59] Maurice Olender, *The languages of paradise: race, religion, and philology in the nineteenth century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (London, 1992); originally, *Les langues du paradis: aryens et sémites, un couple providentiel* (Paris, 1989); Tzvetan Todorov, *On human diversity: nationalism, racism, and exoticism in French thought*, trans. Catherine Porter (London, 1992); originally, *Nous et les autres: la réflexion française sur la diversité humaine* (Paris, 1989).

[60] Olender, *Languages of paradise*, p. 61.

[61] Todorov's book first appeared in a series Said edited, and he also wrote the preface to the new French edition of *Orientalism*.

[62] Todorov, *On human diversity*, pp. 50–5, 140–53.

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The product of the two decades of work from Poliakov to Todorov was a new understanding of the significance of Renan's racial views. In 1957, Richard Chadbourne had been able to write a monograph on Renan's essays that treated his views on the Jews in two pages, and exclusively in terms of their aesthetics, while even in the 1960s and 1970s, Harold Wardman's biographies had paid little attention to Renan's racial language.[63] By the 1980s, this was no longer possible. Race had been found at the centre of historical, ethical, and political arguments from across Renan's lifetime. Historians were, moreover, unable to dismiss his theories as inconsequential simply because they were inconsistent. Jean-Pierre Vernant's foreword to *Languages of paradise* was unambiguous: 'we cannot today fail to see looming in the background the dark silhouette of the death camps and the rising smoke of the ovens'.[64]

Renan is today taken for such an emblematic figure in the canon of linguistic racism that even Tuska Benes's history of German philology opens with Renan's memoirs and devotes a lengthy subsection to his place in the genealogy of Aryanism.[65] Even beyond the walls of the academy, the image of Renan as a conservative race theorist is now often dominant. In a 1997 interview in the generalist magazine *L'Histoire*, the historian and anti-racist campaigner Pierre-André Taguieff described Renan as a 'veritable racist theoretician' who had pioneered a 'scholarly anti-Semitism' (*antisémitisme savant*).[66] A recent profile in the popular news weekly *Le Point* similarly described Renan's thought as 'a museum of horrors and errors', caught between a healthy respect for science and *laïcité*, and an unhealthy cultural and racial elitism.[67] Whether in his stereotypes about the Semitic mind or his exotic descriptions of the Oriental other, Renan's work is today largely seen as granting academic legitimacy to inequalities that have been central to relationships of dominance in the modern world.

IV

The critical interpretation of Renan has reached its apex in Sternhell's latest book, which intends to show that a 'second modernity' was born in the eighteenth century.[68] This intellectual tradition, extending from Herder and Edmund Burke to figures like Maurras and Oswald Spengler, founded itself

[63] Richard M. Chadbourne, *Ernest Renan as an essayist* (London, 1957), pp. 66–8; Harold William Wardman, *Ernest Renan: a critical biography* (London, 1964); idem, *Renan: historien philosophe* (Paris, 1979).

[64] Jean-Pierre Vernant, 'Foreword' to Olender, *Languages of paradise*, p. xi.

[65] Tuska Benes, *In Babel's shadow: language, philology, and nation in nineteenth-century Germany* (Detroit, MI, 2008), pp. 1–3, 221–8; similarly Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 33–8.

[66] Véronique Sales, 'Quand on pensait le monde en termes de races: entretien avec Pierre-André Taguieff', *L'Histoire*, 214 (Oct. 1997), pp. 34–41.

[67] Roger-Pol Droit, 'Le réveil d'Ernest Renan', *Le Point* (29 July 2010).

[68] Sternhell, *Anti-Enlightenment*, p. 1.

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on the rejection of the Kantian idea of the 'emancipation of reason'.[69] Within this dark modernity, Renan features as a notable proponent of anti-democratic ideas whose notion of liberty was exclusive and elitist rather than universal and emancipatory.[70] The word 'Anti' is printed in Gothic blackletter on the front cover of the English edition, leaving the reader in no doubt where this path leads. That Renan was against universal suffrage and an intellectual elitist is clear from any sampling of his political tracts. More dubious is Sternhell's explicit accusation that Renan harboured a conception of 'biological determinism' and an immutable conception of race, his claim that Renan was close to Gobineau, and his assertion that the *Histoire générale* 'is considered to be Renan's major achievement'.[71] To the extent that these claims are substantiated, it is usually on the basis of early works. Despite the discontinuities other writers have outlined, Sternhell repeatedly asserts the unity of Renan's corpus as a tacit justification for this focus.

The fundamental problem with Sternhell's analysis is that it cannot address the contradictions that were so central to Renan's mystique. Why was an apparent founder of modern anti-Semitism so supportive of Jewish scholars? How did the son of a poor fishing family become such a champion of 'aristocratic' cultural values? Why was this devoted academic popularizer and beneficiary of spectacular social mobility so sceptical about the educational and political capabilities of the masses? Understanding why Renan's writings appealed to Maurras or Mussolini does not help us comprehend their value to Huxley or Tolstoy, nor indeed how they outraged Brunetière and Drumont. These questions are not unanswerable, but they do remain largely unresolved in modern scholarship.

At the heart of the reorientations of the 1970s and 1980s was a novel assertion of the close relationship between academic disciplines, culture, and power, which in turn granted Renan exceptional importance as a popularizing philologist. But whether in Mosse's and Poliakov's work on anti-Semitism, Olender's and Said's broader analyses of philology, or Sternhell's capacious interpretation of the 'Anti-Enlightenment', the relationship between philology and culture has often been more presupposed than demonstrated. Moreover, the inherent breadth of the ultimate objects of study – be they European anti-Semitism, French racism, or Orientalism – has necessitated the flattening of nuances and discontinuities.

One incomplete effort to address these problems can be found in the more apologetic tradition that has recently reasserted itself. The articles in *L'Histoire* and *Le Point* both met with refutation from prominent French Renan scholars. Laudyce Rétat defended him from Tauieff's accusations of racism in *L'Histoire*, while Perinne Simon-Nahum dismissed Renan's associations with anti-Semitism and even conservatism as 'legends and misunderstandings' in an interview with

[69] Ibid., p. 5.
[70] Ibid., pp. 241–59.
[71] Ibid., pp. 248, 246.

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Le Point.[72] Rétat has subsequently expanded her defence of Renan's thought through articles in the liberal press and a new monograph on his historical philosophy.[73] For both writers, the essential point is that Renan consistently rejected the biological racism of Gobineau and his sympathizers.[74] Whatever impression might be given by 'superficial readings' and selective quotations from the *Histoire générale*, Renan's definition of race was essentially 'symbolic'.[75]

It is not just *renanistes* who have sought to follow this generous line. The Norwegian Protestant theologian Halvor Moxnes makes a similar case in his *Jesus and the rise of nationalism*. He argues that Renan's ideas were coherent across his works from *Vie de Jésus* to 'Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?'[76] To Moxnes, Renan's contortions over Jesus' origins are attributable to the same 'non-racial' ideal of nationality that he expressed in his renowned lecture.[77] Likewise, the eminent scholar of Jewish philosophy Maurice-Ruben Hayoun has 'absolutely' rejected accusations of Renan's anti-Semitism.[78] In an evocative consideration of his own relationship with Renan's work, Hayoun refuses either to equate the two Renans of before and after 1870, or to identify Renan's writing on the historical role of the Israelites with his views on modern Jews. This view is echoed in Sand's work, which puts a substantial emphasis on Renan's apparent conversion away from racial language during the 1870s; he even describes the elder Renan as a 'consistent republican and patriot' whose work was a 'slap in the face' for the far right.[79] Very recently, Paul Lawrence Rose has joined this chorus by contrasting Renan's 'essentially decent and brave' reversal after 1870 with Gobineau and Drumont's biological anti-Semitism.[80] The broader impact of this scholarship is indicated by the ambiva-

[72] Laudyce Rétat, 'A propos du prétendu racisme de Renan', *L'Histoire*, 216 (Dec. 1997); 'Interview Perrine Simon-Nahum: "Renan n'est pas un conservateur"', *Le Point* (29 July 2010).

[73] Laudyce Rétat, 'Quand Renan dénonçait les "crimes contre l'humanité"', *Commentaire*, 89 (2000), pp. 131–9; idem, *L'Israël de Renan* (Bern, 2005).

[74] See especially Rétat, 'Quand Renan', pp. 133–4.

[75] Rétat, *L'Israël de Renan*, p. 41; idem, 'Renan et la symbolique des races', in Sarga Moussa, ed., *L'idée de 'race' dans les sciences humaines et la littérature (XVIIIe–XIXe siècle)* (Paris, 2003), pp. 321–8.

[76] Halvor Moxnes, *Jesus and the rise of nationalism: a new quest for the nineteenth-century historical Jesus* (London, 2012), ch. 5.

[77] Moxnes, *Jesus*, pp. 144–6.

[78] Maurice-Ruben Hayoun, *Renan, la Bible et les juifs* (Paris, 2008), p. 271.

[79] Sand, 'The unclassifiable Renan', p. 22.

[80] Paul Lawrence Rose, 'Renan versus Gobineau: Semitism and antisemitism, ancient races and modern liberal nations', *History of European Ideas*, 39 (2013), pp. 528–40, quotation from p. 540. Stefan Arvidsson has also sought to reject the 'direct line' between Renan's Aryanism and Nazi anti-Semitism, but his sensitivity leads to a certain inconclusiveness, and his suggestion of 'anti-Jewish' as a replacement for 'anti-Semitic' is unlikely to help clarify matters: *Aryan idols: Indo-European mythology as ideology and science*, trans. Sonia Wichmann (London, 2006), pp. 105–8 and ch. 2 more generally; originally, *Ariska idoler: den indoeuropeiska mytologin som ideologi och vetenskap* (Eslöv, 2000).

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lent tone of Renan's entry in the mammoth new *Handbuch des Antisemitismus*.[81]

Renan's latest defenders are often seeking to forge a 'usable' Renan whose vitality will disperse the 'whiff of antiquity' that Lionel Gossman sensed around his intellectual tradition.[82] Sand's rehabilitation forms part of an attempt to dissociate race from Zionism, while Rétat wishes to turn Renan into a valiant denouncer of British imperialism and the medieval persecution of the Jews; in his theological context, Moxnes hopes to recover *Vie de Jésus* as a provocative attempt to depict a post-racial Christ.[83] Hayoun, meanwhile, simply wishes to restore Renan's reputation as a great scholar.[84]

These analyses all have their blind-spots. Paeans to Renan's cosmopolitan humanism run aground on his sweeping assertions of European superiority, with or without an Aryan–Semitic divide. More fundamentally, defences of Renan's racial thought often seem to miss their mark. The most sophisticated critics, like Olender and Said, never accused Renan of straightforward racism or anti-Semitism; rather, they argued that his judgemental and purportedly scientific discussions of differences between Aryans and Semites contributed to a broader cultural context, which lent traction to dangerous currents like anti-Semitism and colonialism.[85] Manichean interpretations of Renan on both sides have tended to give the subtleties of such analyses too little credit. Even beneath his sometimes questionable judgements of various texts, Sternhell's essential point is similar: that Renan contributed to a vision of essential human inequality, rather than the Enlightenment tradition of equality and universalism. The latest wave of work defending Renan against accusations of anti-Semitism will certainly do something to dispel the crudest caricatures of his thought; but claims about broader intellectual traditions cannot be challenged by largely internal analyses of Renan's texts.

V

Rather than encourage historians to continue measuring Renan's texts against varying yardsticks of prejudice, I wish to propose three new routes out of the perennial clash of the two Renans.

My first suggestion involves further biographical research. Renan has always attracted biographers, but they have usually been drawn by his loss of faith and as such their focus has often been religious. Historians need to subject

[81] Dominique Trimbur, 'Renan, Ernest', in Wolfgang Benz, ed., *Handbuch des Antisemitismus: Judenfeindschaft in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (6 vols., Berlin, 2008–13), II, pp. 681–2.

[82] Lionel Gossman, 'Review: Renan. Historien philosophe, by Harold Wardman', *History and Theory*, 21 (Feb. 1982), p. 107.

[83] Sand, 'The unclassifiable Renan', pp. 32–5; Rétat, 'Quand Renan', p. 131; Moxnes, *Jesus*, p. 146.

[84] Hayoun, *Renan*, p. 270.

[85] A similar spirit guides the brief but subtle analysis in Frank E. Manuel, *The broken staff: Judaism through Christian eyes* (London, 1992), pp. 306–11.

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the evolution of Renan's racial ideas to the same level of scrutiny as that of his religious beliefs, and indeed to pay more attention to the interconnection between the two. Todorov is typical of discursive analysts of Renan's work in acknowledging that he was more interested in texts' intentions and implications than their 'prehistor[ies]' or contradictions.[86] While Olender made suggestive overtures to the connections between Renan's racial and religious beliefs, the threads could be more tightly woven; especially since, as Colin Kidd has suggested for the Protestant world, racial thought was deeply rooted in biblical and theological texts and categories.[87]

Future biographical works might draw on one of the most successful recent treatments of Renan: Jan Goldstein's examination of the young seminarian's crisis of faith in *The post-revolutionary self*. Through a close reading of Renan's seminary notebooks, Goldstein demonstrates that his transition from Catholicism to secular scholarship hinged on a transition to a new, 'Cousinian' view of selfhood that was typical of intellectual elites in the mid-nineteenth century. Given the abundant archival and autobiographical material for Renan's life, historians could search for more concrete connections between his personal transformations and intellectual inconsistencies. How did his exchanges with Jews and Muslims shape his writings? To what extent was he conscious of the potential applications of his work?

A second direction, and perhaps the most critical, is to examine Renan's reception in greater depth. Historians have frequently argued that his ideas mattered because of his cultural authority, but this relationship is only poorly understood. Poliakov's assumption is typical: 'Renan was…regarded as an authority by the whole of international learned society.'[88] Similarly, Said referred to Renan's philological credentials as 'a kind of currency' which circulated in contemporary culture.[89] But discursive approaches that have focused almost exclusively on Renan's texts and taken his audiences for granted have not been able to reveal what value readers gave his 'currency' in the nineteenth-century marketplace of ideas.

An examination of contemporary reviews of Renan's work instantly illustrates the problem with assumptions of influence. When *Vie de Jésus* was published in 1863, the free-thinking historian Ernest Havet was its most strident defender; his article in the *Revue des Deux-Mondes* provoked an entire wave of angry Catholic pamphlets. Yet, Havet explicitly rejected Renan's 'strange severity

[86] Todorov, *On human diversity*, p. xiv.

[87] Colin Kidd, *The forging of races: race and scripture in the Protestant Atlantic world, 1600–2000* (Cambridge, 2006).

[88] Poliakov, *The Aryan myth*, p. 206. Similarly, Michael Sutton, *Nationalism, positivism and Catholicism: the politics of Charles Maurras and French Catholics, 1890–1914* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 39; Arvidsson, *Aryan idols*, p. 93; Manuel, *The broken staff*, pp. 307–10; and Sand, 'The unclassifiable Renan', pp. 10–12.

[89] Said, *Orientalism*, p. 130. Moreover, Karla Mallette has demonstrated that such analyses underestimate the national variation in Orientalists' conclusions about Islam: 'Orientalism and the nineteenth-century nationalist: Michele Amari, Ernest Renan, and 1848', *Romanic Review*, 96 (2005), pp. 233–52.

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towards the Jews', and feared that the book's arguments would be appropriated by anti-Semites.[90] On the other side of the Rhine, the German Orientalist Heinrich Ewald likewise dismissed Renan's racial generalizations: he sardonically attributed the book's stereotypes about Jews and Orientals to Renan's bad luck with the locals on his recent travels to the Near East.[91] These were not marginal figures. Havet was a professor of rhetoric at the Collège de France, while Ewald, from his chair at Göttingen, had been an enormous influence on Renan's own historical work. The fact that a free-thinking French admirer and a Protestant German critic both dismissed Renan's racial argumentation suggests that historians should be more careful about assuming his claims had an unproblematic 'authority' in nineteenth-century culture.

Charle's treatment of Renan's significance during the Dreyfus Affair had the title 'Ce qui disent les noms': what names say.[92] Historians should now address precisely the question of what it has meant, historically, to cite Renan's name. Again, scholarship on other aspects of Renan's thought offers a model. In *Gauguin and Van Gogh*, the art historian Debora Silverman has reinterpreted Gauguin's and Van Gogh's religious paintings through the lens of their readings of Renan's *Vie de Jésus*.[93] This work illustrates how readers could produce radically different interpretations of Renan's books, their attempts to reconcile these with their own ideas (in this case, their notions of Christianity) and how they subsequently redeployed this fusion in their own forms of cultural production. Taking Silverman's approach from the artist's studio to the lecture-hall and the bookshop will allow historians to move beyond a passive notion of influence in the analysis of Renan's racial ideas.

Closer attention to reception will reveal a range of possible intellectual genealogies that took Renan's work as a spur to thought. Historians of anti-Semitism have uncovered a particular tradition that drew on one side of Renan's racial ideas; in the wake of the horrors of the twentieth century, this investigation had an ethical and political urgency. But other trajectories await their historians.

What, for instance, of the Jewish response to Renan? In her examination of nineteenth-century German Hebraists, Susannah Heschel has demonstrated how the Prussian Jewish scholar Abraham Geiger sought to reclaim Jesus as a figure of Judaism and explicitly rejected the racial logic that underpinned histories such as Renan's.[94] For Geiger, *Vie de Jésus* rested on weak scholarship

[90] Ernest Havet, *Jésus dans l'histoire: examen de la Vie de Jésus par M. Renan* (Paris, 1863), pp. 65–7; originally appeared as 'L'Évangile et l'histoire', *Revue des Deux Mondes* (1 Aug. 1863), pp. 564–96.

[91] Heinrich Ewald, '[Review of] *Vie de Jésus*', *Göttingischen gelehrte Anzeigen* (5 Aug. 1863), p. 1213.

[92] Charle, *Naissance*, p. 152.

[93] Debora Silverman, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: the search for sacred art* (New York, NY, 2000), partic. pp. 301–9.

[94] Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (London, 1998), partic. pp. 154–8.

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and an increasingly evident 'fanaticism against Jews and Judaism'.[95] Heymann Steinthal, the German-Jewish co-founder of *Völkerpsychologie*, likewise firmly rejected Renan's ideas of the Semitic 'instinct'.[96] However, as Michael Graetz has shown in his examination of responses to *Vie de Jésus*, French Jews had a much more ambivalent relationship to the man and his work.[97] The Orientalist Joseph Derenbourg, for example, wrote to Renan celebrating *Vie de Jésus* both 'as an artistic biography [and] as a psychological study', but mournfully chided him for so firmly detaching Jesus from Judaism.[98] Others felt that Renan's critical training had yet to wear down eighteen centuries of religious hatred; as the Rabbi of Lunéville put it, 'he still feels the Christian blood in his veins'.[99]

Renan's death in 1892 prompted further divergence among Jewish scholars. The most candid critical voice was that of the Hungarian-Jewish intellectual Ignác Goldziher, a foundational figure in modern Islamic studies. In his commemorative address to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in November 1893, Goldziher attacked Renan's racial determinism on historical and philosophical grounds.[100] Not only had Renan's theories ignored the historical reality of Hebrew monotheism, they had also reduced mentalities that were the products of complex historical relations to the prehistoric 'instinct' of a given ethnic group.[101] French Jews, however, were often more defensive of their compatriot's achievements. To the historian of religion James Darmesteter, the 'dubious and dangerous' element of Renan's identification of race with language hardly merited discussion, since the core claim about Semitic monotheism had simply been disproved by subsequent religious criticism and archaeology.[102] Instead, Darmesteter celebrated Renan's major contribution to Semitic studies in France.[103] Renan's erstwhile Jewish collaborator Adolphe

[95] Abraham Geiger, 'Christliche Gelehrsamkeit in Beziehung auf Judenthum', *Jüdische Zeitschrift für Wissenschaft und Leben*, 2 (1863), p. 295.

[96] Heymann Steinthal, 'Zur Sprachwissenschaft', *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, 11 (1857), pp. 396–410; idem, 'Zur Charakteristik der semitischen Völker', *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*, 1 (1860), pp. 328–45.

[97] Michael Graetz, *The Jews in nineteenth-century France: from the French Revolution to the Alliance Israélite Universelle*, trans. Jane Mary Todd (Stanford, CA, 1996), pp. 235–6; originally published in Hebrew in 1982.

[98] Collection Scheffer-Renan, Paris, MS 28.46, Joseph Derenbourg to Renan, 5 July 1863.

[99] L. Lévy, 'Étude israélite sur le livre de M. Renan', *Archives Israélites*, 24, 18–21 (15 Sept.–1 Nov. 1863), p. 781.

[100] Ignác Goldziher, *Renan als Orientalist: Gedenkrede am 27. November 1893*, trans. Peter Zalán, ed. Freidrich Niewöhner (Zurich, 2000), pp. 37–40; originally, *Renan mint orientalista: emlékbeszéd* (Budapest, 1894). For discussion, see Lawrence I. Conrad, 'Ignaz Goldziher on Ernest Renan: from Orientalist philology to the study of Islam', in M. Kramer, ed., *The Jewish discovery of Islam: studies in honor of Bernard Lewis* (Tel Aviv, 1999), pp. 137–80; Olender, *Languages of paradise*, pp. 121, 129–31.

[101] Goldziher, *Renan als Orientalist*, p. 40.

[102] James Darmesteter, 'La vie et l'œuvre de Ernest Renan', in *Critique et politique* (Paris, 1895), p. 30, originally read at the Société Asiatique in 1893.

[103] Darmesteter, 'Ernest Renan', pp. 70–2.

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Neubauer, meanwhile, explicitly defended him against charges of anti-Semitism: he called Renan a 'cosmopolitan in the strictest sense', who 'meant no harm to the Jews' despite his overenthusiastic resort to psychological reductions.[104] These men's attitudes towards Renan warrant further scholarly attention. Historians need to understand the conflicting motives that drove Jewish interpretations of Renan's work after his death and into the twentieth century, as his academic ascendancy gave way, and as the context for discussing race and religion in Europe changed dramatically.

A final direction for new research might emerge from one of Said's most suggestive claims: that the exoticization of the Oriental other was a 'strange secret sharer' of anti-Semitism, and therefore might point the way to a history which encompassed European attitudes to both Jews and Arabs.[105] Renan's work provides an ideal site for such an investigation, since he applied his deterministic theories on the Semites to both groups. As Moxnes notes, Renan's prejudices against contemporary Muslims in the 1860s fed his stereotypes about biblical Jews.[106] When Renan moderated his rhetoric on Jews after 1870, he seems to have increasingly viewed Arab Muslims as the authentic remnants of the Semitic spirit. The relationship between these two judgements has, however, passed largely unexamined.

Renan's views on Islam are starting to receive the attention they deserve. Twenty-first century discussions about Islam's relationship to modernity have brought particular attention to his debate with the Iranian-born intellectual Al-Afghani in 1883. On 29 March that year, Renan gave a lecture at the Sorbonne on 'L'islamisme et la science'.[107] He argued that Islam was a religion exceptionally hostile to science and philosophy; indeed its 'hatred of science' flattened any differences of race or nationality.[108] Al-Afghani read the report of Renan's lecture in the *Journal des Débats* and wrote a letter of rebuttal to the newspaper on 18 May, to which Renan responded the following day. While Al-Afghani acknowledged that religious intolerance obstructed scientific progress, he refused to accept that Islam was in any way exceptional in this regard. He also rebutted Renan's claim that the leaders of the Arab Golden Age were not in fact Arabs, but rather Indo-European Persians. The American historian Nikki Keddie introduced this debate to Anglophone readers in the late 1960s but it has lately edged closer to the historiographical foreground.[109] It forms a central part of the Indian historian S. Irfan Habib's

[104] Adolphe Neubauer, 'M. Ernest Renan', *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 52 (1893), pp. 203–4. I am grateful to Theodor Dunkelgrün for this reference.

[105] Said, *Orientalism*, p. 27; on this, James Pasto, 'Islam's "strange secret sharer": Orientalism, Judaism, and the Jewish question', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 40 (1998), pp. 437–74.

[106] Moxnes, *Jesus*, p. 131.

[107] *OC*, I, pp. 945–65.

[108] *OC*, I, p. 957.

[109] Nikki R. Keddie, *An Islamic response to imperialism: political and religious writings of Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn 'al-Afghānī'* (Berkeley, CA, 1968), partic. pp. 84–95; Al-Afghani's text is reproduced pp. 181–90.

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recent discussion of the relationship between Islam and science, while Pankaj Mishra has offered it to a broad readership with his history of Asian intellectuals. Mishra labels the exchange: 'the first major public debate between a Muslim and a European intellectual'.[110] But despite the prominence it has received in these recent works from historians of Asia and the Middle East, the Al-Afghani debate remains surprisingly obscure in most general works on Renan.

These efforts point to an even larger potential field: the history of the reception of Renan's ideas outside Europe. As historians such as Tony Ballantyne have shown, the 'Aryan Myth' had many afterlives in the imperial world during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[111] There is reason to believe that Renan's racial thought had an important and complex place in such developments. For example, Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski have demonstrated that, during the 1920s, anti-Arab nationalists in Egypt formed an enthusiastic audience for Renan's early works on Semitics. His apparently impermeable division of Indo-Europeans and Semites attracted 'Egyptianist intellectuals' such as Ahmad Dayf, who propagated an Egyptian identity predicated on their superiority from the supposedly backward Arabs.[112] Furthermore, given that one of Renan's official English translators was a Bengali, Râs Bihârî Mukharjî, and that at least one autodidact freed slave in Brazil eagerly consumed *Vie de Jésus*, there is ample reason to believe that Renan's global readership has much to tell us about the complex consumption of his racial views.[113]

VI

The tug-of-war between attack and apologia that opened this review has therefore characterized the literature on Renan ever since his works were first published, even as the political dividing lines have shifted. But we do not have to admire Renan in order to study him sensitively, or demonize him in order to read him critically. Renan's early declarations on the Semites can be made to fit neatly into a history of race that draws a line across the academic disciplines,

[110] S. Irfan Habib, *Jihad or ijtihad? Religious orthodoxy and modern science in contemporary Islam* (New Delhi, 2012), pp. 42–9; Pankaj Mishra, *From the ruins of empire: the revolt against the West and the remaking of Asia* (London, 2012), p. 100 and ch. 2 more generally.

[111] Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and race: Aryanism in the British empire* (Basingstoke, 2002); Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, 'Self-orientalization and dislocation: the uses and abuses of the "Aryan" discourse in Iran', *Iranian Studies*, 44 (2011), pp. 445–72.

[112] Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs: the search for Egyptian nationhood, 1900–1930* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 101–7.

[113] Ernest Renan, *Philosophical dialogues and fragments*, trans. Râs Bihârî Mukharjî (London, 1883); Ligia Fonseca Ferreira, 'Luiz Gama: um abolicionista leitor de Renan', *Estudos avançados*, 21 (2007), pp. 271–88. The limited work on the international reception of Renan largely focuses on his religious ideas and *Vie de Jésus*, see Heather Bailey, *Orthodoxy, modernity, and authenticity: the reception of Ernest Renan's Life of Jesus in Russia* (Newcastle, 2008); David Burns, *The life and death of the radical historical Jesus* (Oxford, 2013), on the USA.

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through philology, anthropology, and biology, and then ends in Nazism. But if historians consider Renan as a discrete figure, who had doubts and reversals, who used race in varying ways, who was not always confident in his own prescriptions, and who did not inspire the unanimous confidence of his peers, then it will open more possibilities for writing new and less teleological histories of race.[114] Most fundamentally, however, we need to investigate the reception of Renan's ideas with renewed vigour and openness, probing more deeply into European society, and searching more broadly beyond the continent. To recast the quotation from Zola that served as this review's epigraph, we might say that it is precisely the 'Renans of legend' who now have the most to offer us as historians.

[114] On this, see Jonathan Boyarin's response to the Vernant quotation that was cited earlier in this article, in 'The missing keyword: reading Olender's Renan', *Qui Parle*, 7 (1994), p. 45.

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