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Review of Jewish Exiles and European Thought in the Shadow of the Third Reich: Baron, Popper, Strauss, Auerbach by David Weinstein and Avihu Zakai

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Jewish Exiles and European Thought in the Shadow of the Third Reich: Baron, Popper, Strauss, Auerbach. By David Weinstein and Avihu Zakai. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2017. Pp. x + 307. \$31.99. ISBN: 978-1108704984.

Using the techniques of the Cambridge School of intellectual history, David Weinstein and Avihu Zakai rigorously contextualize the exile-inspired works of Hans Baron, Karl Popper, Leo Strauss, and Erich Auerbach. This is particularly ironic because all four authors were peculiar practitioners of history. In the cases of Popper and Strauss, we have two writers who saw historicism as the cause of the world's evils (in particular, totalitarianism). In the case of Baron, we have a historian simultaneously using the crisis of the Second World War to (anachronistically, at times) interpret Renaissance Florence while also using Renaissance Humanism to try to salvage the best qualities of Western Civilization from Nazi barbarism. And finally, in the case of Erich Auerbach, we see philology being used as a historical tool to salvage the Judeo-Christian tradition, while also being deployed to wage war with Aryan race theory and its practitioners' desire to excise the Old Testament from German Christianity and culture. Despite the fact that all four of these writers probably would have vigorously objected to the historical contextualizing of their work accomplished with great rigor and care by Weinstein and Zakai, contemporary scholars of exile studies are the beneficiaries of this stimulating and learned prosopographic analysis. The authors reconstruct the academic environments that produced Baron, Popper, Strauss, and Auerbach, as well the developments that led them to produce their most famous works in exile. Each saw Nazism as a threat to Western Civilization itself, although each identified and defined that threat in different ways. While this makes their work political, it makes it political in a less traditional sense.

In the only explicitly autobiographical writing of his life, Franz L. Neumann, the legal and political theorist who famously wrote *Behemoth*, describes the general trauma of exile and the more specific predicament of exile for the political intellectual. As Neumann wrote, “He [the exile] has to cut himself off from an historical tradition, a common experience; has to learn a new language; has to think and experience within it and through it; has, in short, to create a totally new life... Specifically the political scholars faced the psychological difficulty; for being political, they fought – or should have fought – actively for a better, more decent political system. Being compelled to leave their homeland, they thus suffered the triple of fate of a displaced *human being* with property and family; a displaced *scholar*; and a displaced *homo politicus*.” It is precisely the struggles of the political intellectual that are documented in *Jewish Exiles and European Thought in the Shadow of the Third Reich*.

Weinstein and Zakai emphasize the various dimensions of German-Jewish identity as a focal point of their analysis. Although this is undoubtedly an important point of reference for making sense of these four writers, this focus may obscure an equally important angle for investigation – the fact that all four were also self-consciously political intellectuals in the sense that Franz L. Neumann had in mind. This is important, because it is also the authors’ contention that all four of their subjects distorted the past in idiosyncratic and eccentric ways. Although this may be due to the particular traumas that Jewish exiles from Nazi Europe experienced, it may also be a typical by-product of exile itself. Edward Said’s “Reflections on Exile” describes exiles from a variety of different circumstances, regions, and national identities, yet he saw peculiarity as the common feature in the writing of all exiled intellectuals: “Seeing ‘the entire world as a foreign land’ makes possible originality of vision.” If “original vision” is the norm and not the exception

of all exiled intellectuals, how can we make more precise sense of the specific idiosyncrasies that are evident in the writings of Baron, Popper, Strauss and Auerbach? Perhaps the answer to this lies within the very different “better and more decent political systems” envisioned by each that Neumann saw as the preoccupation of the exiled political intellectual.

What was it about Florentine Humanism that Baron saw as essential for the fight against fascism, and what kind of world did he want to emerge out of the Second World War? What did Popper hope to accomplish by exposing the “historicist” tradition that he saw evident in the legacies of Plato, Hegel, and Marx, and how was this supposed to transform (or perhaps inform) a post-war world? What type of political order did Strauss hope to construct out of the tradition of Classical Natural Law? And, what did Auerbach expect to be the political by-product of salvaging the Western Judeo-Christian humanist tradition? It may be that none of the four exiled writers had very concrete answers to such questions, but doesn't that make them a distinctive type of political intellectual, perhaps a bit different from the variety that Neumann envisioned? Where does one situate the salvaging of civilization in the context of twentieth-century politics?

It is all the more important to consider the specific dimensions of their political project, when, again, one considers the historical context. This was a generation that experienced two revolutions. The first occurred in 1918-1919 when the Council Movement rose up and precipitated the resignation of the Kaiser and his Imperial Government. As Peter Fritzsche compellingly argued in his book, *Germans into Nazis*, this did not produce a “republic without republicans”, but rather hyper-democracy. The Great War inspired Germans to imagine an ideal Germany for which to sacrifice. Those ideal Germanys had the

chance to be realized in the immediate aftermath of the war. What ideal Germany did Baron, Popper (who although Austrian, encountered some of the same dynamics), Strauss and Auerbach envision? Were they nostalgic for the old world destroyed by the First World War? Were they committed to some other political arrangement that never came to be? What became of their early political sensibilities as idealism was challenged by post-war realities? It would be helpful to know the answer to these mysteries, because they then shed light on their responses to the Brown Revolution that arose in the wake of the Great Depression.

The authors clearly demonstrate the purpose behind the selection of the four political intellectuals who are the focus of this book. Each engaged in a war of ideas with Nazism and sought to recruit anyone willing to listen to join them in this struggle, and they waged these battles with the use of purposefully distorted histories and engagements with historicism. This, however, is where the similarities end. The key problem that remains unanswered is why each took such different positions and developed such different strategies. This is bound to be the result of their own political commitments that developed during the years of the Weimar Republic, but a clearer presentation of their intellectual biographies would help to clarify this important issue raised by the book.