

INTRODUCTION

Terminology is the root of all unhappiness.

—ANTON KUH

Originals and original meanings cling to some concepts more than to others. Or so it can seem. Take “antisemitism,” which entered the popular lexicon in 1879. It was then that a journalist in Germany dubbed his own outlook “antisemitic,” because he wanted to mark the difference between himself and bigots he deemed less serious. The applications and connotations of the term soon expanded. Within a few years, orthodox Jews had started using it to characterize their reform rivals. But no matter: “antisemitism” has long been *the* key category in the study of anti-Jewish prejudice, and in a way, this history has freed the concept from its beginnings. Haven’t we come to think that if a lot of us can work with “antisemitism” judiciously, then just about everyone should be able to? After all, when “antisemitism” is wielded as a means of inciting or smearing, we say little about the pull of old patterns. It is, for the most part, the wielder who gets the blame.

Now consider “Jewish self-hatred.” We find it, too, relied upon at the highest levels of scholarship. Yet “Jewish self-hatred” hasn’t established itself there to the same degree as “antisemitism,” and this difference appears to have made, well, all the difference.¹ For when someone employs “Jewish self-hatred” reductively or vituperatively—in whatever con-

text—it often happens that the phrase’s history is held responsible, especially its early history. That “Jewish self-hatred” took shape as a polemical weapon, that it rose to prominence as an instrument of censure—these views have staple-like status in critical responses to the concept, quite a few of which feature claims about how the concept’s original meanings have managed to hold their ground. Only “Jewish self-hatred” neither came about nor gained currency in the ways I’ve just described. And so a revision, if not an apologia, is in order.

This isn’t to suggest that every attempt to write the genealogy of “Jewish self-hatred” has been carried out in the service of a critique. There are other accounts, accounts that don’t seek, in effect, to discredit the concept. But these have proven to be almost as misleading as the most programmatic ones, which raises a series of questions, beginning with: why? Why has the emergence of “Jewish self-hatred” been so hard to track? What is it about the history of the concept, and what is it about how we practice conceptual history, that has made for such a high rate of failure? In part 1, I offer some answers. Doing so will involve examining the prehistory of “Jewish self-hatred,” which is, as it happens, also important for understanding the genesis of that particular notion.

Indeed, one of the aims of this book is to show that “Jewish self-hatred” was forged in opposition to the terms that look like—and that have been seen as—its precursors.² Contrary to what scholars and critics often argue, “Jewish self-hatred” didn’t come into being as a straightforward extension of a long-running, mostly censorious discussion of Jewish self-contempt. It was formulated, rather, to promote a very different way of thinking. For Anton Kuh and Theodor Lessing—the semisuccessful authors who, respectively, coined and popularized the concept—“Jewish self-hatred” was a heading that stood at once for a very big problem and its world-saving solution. In their works, “Jewish self-hatred”

has, along with various other connotations, nothing less than redemptive meanings.³

Part 2 focuses on Kuh, part 3 on Lessing. Each tells the story of how its subject came to use “Jewish self-hatred” as he did. In both cases, we will hear about a host of factors. Both Kuh and Lessing had personal stakes in their conceptual endeavors, for example. They grew up in assimilated—or rather, assimilationist—German-Jewish homes, which is where their interest in the dynamics of assimilationism began. Furthermore, in defining “Jewish self-hatred,” Kuh and Lessing deal mostly with their own ranks: German-Jewish intellectuals. Hence Alfred Döblin’s assessment of the book in which, with plenty of shtick, Kuh unveils his term; upon reading *Jews and Germans* (1921), Döblin remarked, “What good is all the wit in the world if you’re only talking about five acquaintances?”⁴

Of course, we could say the same thing about many reckonings with the Jewish Question. What caused Döblin to wonder about Kuh’s approach is probably that Kuh relies on local reference points in discussing not simply the plight of the Jews, but also the fate of all humanity. In fact, “Jewish self-hatred” is, in a sense, a consequence of the First World War and the large-scale reorienting to which the war led. Kuh’s belief that much had become clearer and much had changed helped prompt him to call for a terminological shift, his logic being that the new situation should have at least elements of its own vocabulary. Generally speaking, the war radicalized both Kuh’s and Lessing’s thought, while fostering, as well, greater complexity. Though hardly identical, both their responses to the events of 1914–18 entailed cultivating incongruous—and even incompatible—ideas about the ills of modern society. And as we will see, both Kuh and Lessing used “Jewish self-hatred” to resolve those tensions, and in such a way that the concept signifies just the capacity through which the Jews could teach the world how to heal itself.

Kuh found inspiration for his paradoxes in a number of sources. Some have faded from view as much as he has, as, for example, the psychologist Otto Gross. Others are as famous as ever. Foremost among the latter group is Nietzsche, who once spoke of “Jewish hatred” as “the profoundest and most sublime kind of hatred, previously unknown on earth and capable of creating ideals and reversing values.”⁵ Lessing, too, built upon Nietzsche’s thought, and Lessing almost certainly drew on Kuh’s *Jews and Germans* when he wrote his higher-profile book, *Jewish Self-Hatred* (1930). What, then, about the effect of that work? Did the affirmative meanings that Lessing gave to “Jewish self-hatred” ever stick well enough to make their presence felt? For reasons that should become clear, this question is a good point from which to begin a new genealogy of “Jewish self-hatred”—and thus it is also a good place to break off.