

Inventing the Jew: Antisemitic Stereotypes in Romania and Other Central European Cultures (review)

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Oisteanu, Andrei, *Inventing the Jews. Antisemitic Stereotypes in Romania and Other Central European Cultures*. Studies in Antisemitism. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, London for the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. 2009. ISBN 978-0-8032-2098-0, x+468p.

Moshe Idel, the most prominent kabala scholar of our time sets a tone of the volume as the first sentence of his introduction labels Oisteanu as „an expert in Romanian folklore and an active Jewish intellectual in Romania”. The lengthy book is a summary of „ethnic imagology” of Jews in Romania and a long overdue historical milestone in Romania research on stereotyping.

The book is coming from a very controversial national legacy. In 1940 the second largest European Jewish community lived in Romania with 800 000 members and it was labeled by Hannah Arendt as “the most anti-Semitic country”. However the “Olympics of anti-Semitism” examining who is the most anti-Semitic of all will not lead to anywhere as Oisteanu himself also pointed out. Especially not while after 1945 the sheer denial of existence of any other nationalities than Romanian living in Romania made the book by Feuchtwanger, *The Jewess of Toledo* published in Romanian entitled as *The Spaniard Ballad*.

The book is a summary of a rich research work Oisteanu often at a daunting level of detail executed following the best tradition of Romanian intellectual life: it is rich in content and flamboyant in style and in its empirical basis. The structure of the book is divided to show the physical, occupational, moral and intellectual, mythical and magical, religious portrait. The book resembles an encyclopedia which aims to summarize all possible details and information about the “image of the other” and its stringent demand on the reader's continuous attentiveness makes it a difficult reading. It is very useful reading for those who want to experience the richness of this very complex matrix of stereotyping based on all possible written sources about the Romanian culture. The empirical base of the book is very wide and heterogeneous: from jokes to newspapers, literary works. The author was looking to every possible corner of the Romanian culture to find out what the Jews were thought about. He looked at every corner, except visual.

The critical comments are related to how the book is handling temporality. Stereotypes are presented as timeless and no matter that the chapters are more or less following chronological order of presenting the material the reader is left in darkness how certain types of stereotypes are surfacing at a certain historical period, while others not. This timelessness on the other hand has an advantage because it shows how invisible is the line between marking a group of people alongside certain characteristic and to deny their existence along the very same lines.

In the book Jew stands as a “category,” understood by Brubaker in disaggregated, dynamic and relational terms. This understanding could have been more fruitfully explored in some cases such as in the case of the stereotypical “Jewess”. This issue is discussed in a rather old fashioned way in the section on physical portrait of the book. It is the first level of the analyses to describe the female Jew as beautiful, tempting but inaccessible, wearing silk and sophisticated jewelry. The second level which is not present in the book is looking at how gender stereotypes are constitutive parts of constructing image of the other and how these stereotypes are changing in time in different contexts.

In the introduction of the book the author describes the methodology as comparative in time, in space, in cultures and in ethnicity. This is a very ambitious aim. We can not blame the book that it fails to deliver the universalistic aim and the argumentation often difficult to follow because of the rich but often heterogeneous details. We should rather celebrate the book as a closing cornerstone which is a historical snapshot of difficult centuries of co-habitation of Jews and Romanians in Central Europe.

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