

BOOK REVIEWS

AMIT VARSHIZKY, *The Metaphysics of Race: Science and Faith in the Nazi Worldview* (London, New York: Routledge, 2025)

Given the inextricable racial foundations on which its ideological edifice was constructed, National-Socialism is often singled out as a unique iteration of inter-war era fascism. Numerous historical contributions approaching its *Weltanschauung* have placed the idea of race at its core, while more recent tendencies have integrated racism into a broader conception, avoiding the reduction of Germany's fascist experience to a singular determinant. Embracing the nuances of the latter perspective, Amit Varshizky manages to decipher, through his latest book, the nature of National-Socialist racial ideology by resorting to the philosophical, scientific and spiritual traditions that preceded and anticipated it. In *The Metaphysics of Race: Science and Faith in the Nazi Worldview*, which originated as a doctoral thesis at the University of Tel Aviv, the Israeli-German historian embarks on a meandering journey to unveil the biological, ethical, political, cultural and theological underpinnings of race in German culture. This ambitious undertaking is also a humane inquiry into the mechanics of annihilatory violence, an open pursuit to "fathom the inner world of the perpetrators," to extend the comprehension of the fascist project which derailed Germany into the cataclysm of war and genocide (xi).

The operating premise of the analysis derives from a fundamental concern with revolutionary ideology, opening several epistemological avenues pertaining to the nature of science in high modernity and the dialectic of religion and secularisation. Varshizky advances from a cogent standpoint according to which, on the socio-political scene of the Weimar Republic, there was a growing anxiety inspired by "a vision of a mechanistic utilitarian society," juxtaposed to an equally intense fear of "a growing materialisation of life and the instrumentalization of values," determining a reaction under "the banner of organicism, holism and vitalism" as the salvific solutions to anomie (2-3). It is a valid premise, expanded upon by painstakingly following the processes through which Nazis confiscated the theological and philosophical traditions of old, spliced them with futural elements and moulded them into a racialised worldview. In the National-Socialist comprehension of the world, Varshizky recognises a "new conceptual nexus between the natural and the cultural, the physical and the spiritual," an uncanny synthesis of knowledge (*Wissen*) and faith (*Glaube*) (3).

An introductory overview revisits major directions of German intellectual history, in anticipation of a three-pronged argument which navigates through the scientific, political and theological fields. The opening chapter contemplates the trajectory of racial notions in post-Enlightenment German culture, encapsulating a major ideological "shift from race to racism" (13). A thorough demonstration reveals the integration of the racial mindset by German

nationalists into an identitarian scaffolding, mixing *völkisch* and neo-Romantic conceptions and producing a mythical, “organic *Volksgemeinschaft* rooted in intimate blood ties, drawn from the deterministic forces embedded in the laws of nature and history” (14). Holism, vitalism and pantheism are set at the heart of a consistent philosophical tradition, instilling rebellion against traditional metaphysics and theological constraints alike. German Romantic thinkers formulated what is described as a quasi-pantheistic ideal of “unity of God and nature,” bypassing “the somewhat forced choice between rational nihilism and irrational Fideism” (18). This is a particularly useful framing of Romantic thought, since it allows for the clarification of its later ideological permeations, with pantheism seen as the cornerstone of the purported liberation of the German spirit. Adding to the ascent of Romanticism, the triumph of social Darwinism and evolutionary biology is approached in the protean cultural context of 19th century Germany, the application of Darwinian principles to societal frameworks arriving as a decisive “weapon in the cultural struggle for a secular, a-teleological and rational worldview” (19). From such projections, there was a predictable derivation of racial interpretations, reinforced by eugenics, towards social engineering visions animated by ideals of biological improvement.

In a structural sense, the fateful transformation of biology into *Ersatz* religion is correlated with the profound crisis of modernity, encompassing the atomisation of the social body and the dissolution of traditional institutions, the spirit of cultural erosion and the fervent contestation of positivism and materialism. These realities amalgamated into an offensive against massification, industrialisation, liberalism, democratisation, an overarching reaction reclaiming the organicist ideal of a cultural *Volk*. Theological and biological notions, embedded with antisemitic and conservative positions, coalesced into a worldview quintessentially expressed by two major doctrinaires: on the one hand, Ernst Haeckel’s “scientific pantheism” and monism sought “to establish biology as a secular religion,” unshackled from the Christian irrationality, recuperated as a “keystone of national, spiritual and ethical revitalisation” (22); on the other hand, Houston Stewart Chamberlain’s racial philosophy, infused with vitalist metaphysics, articulated a pan-German “national mythology and race-based ethno-national identity” (22) of a purportedly superior people. It is compellingly noted that, within such reworkings of the meanings of modernity, the biological nexus substituted the divine principle and transferred the source of absolute truth into the plain of the immanent, the physical, the natural.

Adding to this charged ideological mixture, holism arose out of the ashes of the First World War as a reaction against the modern Western model, claiming, along with vitalism and organicism, a rupture with the Enlightenment, “replacing ethics with aesthetics, reason with experience and logocentrism with a biocentric worldview” (27). These developments occurred in a fast-moving environment, where the inherent meanings of science, ethics and politics, as well as their inner relations, were questioned like never before. Illustrative to that extent are authoritative sociologists such as Max Weber, Werner Sombart and Ferdinand Tönnies, who aimed to extract the humanities from Bismarckian politics and to liberate science from all superposed value (moral, political or otherwise), creating an axiologically agnostic *wertfreie Wissenschaft* (30). Such grandiose revisions of knowledge would be perturbed by the continental conflict, perceived in radical circles as a quintessential struggle of the “organic, holistic and

idealistic view of *Kultur*,” embodied by the German nation, against the “mechanistic, atomistic and materialistic view of *Zivilisation*,” represented by France and England (32). Epistemological concerns aside, other influential interpretations of the war cast it as the forge of a rejuvenated generational ethos of primal heroism (Ernst Jünger) or as the turning point of a historical phase of irreversible mutation and imminent collapse (Oswald Spengler).

Following the elucidation of the German cultural context, the first segment of the analytical trifecta approaches man as the cardinal subject of racial thinking. The inter-war era was a time of radical transformation for established institutions and methodologies, in which spectacular developments occurred in fields such as genetics and heredity, while a new generation of scientists advocated for the advancement of eugenics, racial hygiene and a novel “social anthropology.” Of course, these disparate intellectual threads never aggregated into a cohesive construction, but subsided as heterogenous forces spanning the entire ideological spectrum, with eugenic theories, as per the author’s example, embraced by ultranationalist racists and ultraconservative antisemites, as well as by comparatively benign socialists and liberals. Doctrinal affiliations notwithstanding, it was also a time of crucial transition from “physical anthropology based on anthropometric methods to biological anthropology based on genetics” (44), further muddling the definitions of race and paving the way for a merger of “science and politics, facts and values, under the auspices of the new racial-biological edifice” (50).

These theoretical paths are illustrated through several biographical sketches, beginning with an examination of Fritz Lenz, a central figure for the articulation of National Socialist racial theory. A typical “right-wing German mandarin,” Lenz is portrayed as the legitimator of a *völkisch* Aryanism with philosophical underpinnings, grounding racial heredity and eugenic selection into metaphysical foundations. Of particular interest are his attempts to reconcile biological determinism and political agency, a conundrum at the forefront of eugenic consciousness. A loyalist of the fascist regime, Lenz called for a faith based “will for self-affirmation” in the detriment of unaltered scientific knowledge, developing “an irrational and quasi-mystical conception of race” (58) immune to methodological validation. Another dominant figure of the theory of race, Hans F.K. Günther comes into focus next on account of his influential *Rassenkunde des deutschen Volkes* (1922), a later bestseller in the Third Reich. His notorious work advanced a typological approach to racial anthropology, determining a Nordic racial bloc with a unique comprehension of the world and emphasising both a mandatory *Wiedernordnung* (“re-Nordification”) of the superior race and an eradication of inferior genetic mixtures (*Aufnordnung*) required for the perpetuation of the German nation. Günther even evoked Plato as a precursor of his thought system, reclaiming the Greek philosopher as the “forerunner of racial theory and the eugenic worldview” (68), as supposedly proven by his archetypal *politeia*. The last discussed figure of the pantheon of racial theorists is Ludwig Ferdinand Clauß, who advanced a complex model of racial psychology (*Rassenseelenkunde*) in his theoretical colonisation of the “racial-psychic terrain” (74). As opposed to racial schools of thought which privileged genetics and morphology, Clauß advocated for a phenomenological transcendence of the seemingly intractable contradictions of the field, “a shift from an essentialist to a morphological conception of race” (75), understanding the latter as a style of experience (*Stil*

des Erlebnisses). In Clauß's racial system, physiognomy and anthropometry were subordinated to "a typology of mental styles" (80), encompassing axiological structures dependent upon their environment, with an inevitable superiority assigned to Nordic elements and an amorphous 'raceless' content ascribed to the Jewish community. Despite substantial ideological differences, Lenz, Günther and Clauß are regarded as examples of a radical reframing of human biology, entrenching science "in both reason and intuition," striking down the barriers between "empirical knowledge, aesthetics and metaphysics" (92) and willing to crush the metaphysical canopy of the Western world.

In the second segment of the volume, the analysis moves on to the mobilization of racial science in "an all-encompassing worldview that saturates every sphere of life" (103), permeating the fibre of the German fascist body politic. With the definitive institutionalisation of the Third Reich, the politicisation of science became normative and an ensemble of philosophical, ethical and epistemological justifications were brought forth, with race now central to the new order's conception of reality. Quite significantly, as the author remarks, National Socialism represented itself in abstract terms as a total *Weltanschauung* rather than a mere *Ideologie*, presumably situated above competing ideological systems and assuming "a complete set of values and meanings tied to a particular national, political and cultural affiliation," an existential stance "determined by the immediate and intuitive racial experience of being in the world" (109-110). Instrumental to that end was the "revitalisation of language," which National Socialism morphed into a device subjugated by action instead of thought, creating a "metalanguage," a symbolic-metaphoric vocabulary meant to inspire profound axiological shifts (p. 114). This was integral to the fascist anthropological revolution fervently pursued by National Socialism, among other ideological instruments, through "the principle of organic unity" (115), making instrumental use of the racial idea in order to reconcile individual self-expression and holistic totality (*Ganzheitsprinzip*). Through this prism, the state itself, inherently devoid of organic implications, was to become a valid construction, infused by "the principle of organic wholeness" (132), which defined the biological and historical trajectory of the people and propelled the Führer, its absolute identifier, as the harbinger of collective unity and force.

To exemplify these psychological mutations, the analysis turns to Hans Alfred Grunsky, who adapted the political philosophy of Plato into a theoretical model postulating a soul-like quality inherent to the National Socialist body politic. This framework of German identity was conceived in terms of 'a unity of spirit-blood-world' that was fundamentally racist, developing a malignant projection of otherness assigned to the "eschatological object that hinders redemption," namely the Jew (137-138). Another exponential figure merging the psychological and the racial, Wilhelm Wundt, the theorist of *Völkerpsychologie*, is evoked as the originator of an influential current meant to transfer the scientific apparatus to "mental expressions of cultural life," including language, art, mythology, religion (139-140) and to form a putative "supra-personal consciousness." Ostensibly, this was supposed to unleash the authentic psychological laws governing communities, to unshackle the *Volksseele* ("folk-soul") and to instate a new ethics, resulting from the "collective will" (*Gesamtwille*). Such notions are

regarded as embellishments of an “ethnocentric national chauvinism” (142), appropriated by a contingent of German scientists who reinforced the precepts of racial anthropology and racial psychology.

In the final section, religion comes to the analytical forefront through an exploration of the “theology of race,” firstly from a historiographic angle. A useful preamble distinguishes between major approaches on the role of religion in National-Socialism, with the phenomenon comprehended over the course of decades in various ways: as integrally nihilistic, atheistic and cynical, emulating religion’s exterior aspects in instrumental fashion; as overtly pagan, mystical, anti-Christian, uncompromisingly hostile to traditional belief systems; as fundamentally aligned with various Christian orientations, particularly through its antisemitic formulations etc. Stepping outside entrenched canons and paradigms, Varshizky admits a “philosophical consistency” to the National Socialist immersion into the religious sphere, crystallising a faith akin to “religiosity” (158). Its racial metaphysical core amalgamated grand philosophies of history with spiritual elements, as illustrated by Alfred Rosenberg’s magnum opus, *Des Mythus des 20. Jahrhunderts*, the epitome of “biological racism intermingled with theological narratives employing vitalist language” (162), a metahistorical projection, counterposing the clash of the Nordic race with Judeo-Catholicism as the ultimate constant of diachronic evolution. An astute observation concerns the manner in which religion was situated on biological and anthropological rather than theological and confessional grounds. Never embracing outright atheism, German fascism instead engaged in a “resacralisation” of the world in order to transform the fundamental relation between man and God and to charge it with the substance of myth. Furthermore, in Varshizky’s interpretation, National Socialism remained fundamentally hostile to transcendence, its metaphysical focus resting on the immanence of existence, on man shaping faith and not the other way around (179). In defining his stance, the author frequently refers to historiographic positions which either staunchly denied any semblance of National-Socialist transcendent propensity (Ernst Nolte) or fervently affirmed the eschatological appeal of fascism transcendence (George L. Mosse). Looming the largest on that front is the political religion paradigm, originating in the thought of Eric Voegelin, who attempted to uncover the authentic “inner-worldly religion” within German fascism, although, as the analysis underlines, with an accentuation of formal manifestations rather than metaphysical formulations. For his own part, Varshizky nuances the sacralisation of politics model, departing from matters of liturgy, rituals and symbolism, and focusing on the spiritual inventory as an ensemble of “suggestive techniques [...] designed to arouse mythic experience by aesthetical means” (187).

Bringing his excellent study to a close, Varshizky reiterates the acute existential and spiritual crisis out of which fascism emerged in Germany, the dysfunctions of modernisation and secularisation allowing for the triumph of the “new and all-encompassing *Weltanschauung*” of National Socialism, aiming at national redemption and claiming to provide the “spiritual antidote to the growing materialisation and mechanisation of human life” (203). Such conclusions are consonant with the current state of fascist studies and expand upon the advancements of the field, covering significant ground particularly as far as the analytical interpretation of primary sources is concerned. All in all, *The Metaphysics of Race* is an absorbing and sophisticated take

on the doctrinal workings of German fascism, shedding new light upon its ideological identity, at the centre of which invariably, obsessively and calamitously loomed the ominous shadow of race.

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