

# GROUP PROCESS

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**THE JEWISH MYSTIQUE.** Ernest Van Den Haag. Stein and Day. New York. \$5.95. 252 pp.

**Reviewed by Gerald J. Gargiulo**

Theodor Reik was witty, urbane, learned yet somewhat casual in his writings; at times he was personal as well. The present work, written by a psychoanalyst-sociologist, is in its style reminiscent of Reik. Although not particularly personal, it is urbane and somewhat casual; it is, unfortunately, less learned. The various chapter titles have a provocative flavor. Each one is thematic in itself, and thus the book has no overall thesis which it develops. The author muses about each theme as it arises, making for looseness of structure. Note the following chapter titles for a sense of the book's contents: "Are Jews Smarter Than Other People?"; "Is There A Jewish Character?"; "To Suffer Is To Survive--And Vice Versa"; "Do Jews Make Better Doctors?" etc.

The book makes some interesting, but not particularly acute, observations; it indulges in repetition (perhaps just poor editing); it meanders onto political topics, occasionally begging the question. Finally there are some perfectly absurd statements which cannot be excused under the mantle of casualness. An example of these is the following: "Few are the nations whose recorded history goes back so far and is so complete as that of the Jews; their written history *starts with the creation of the world in Genesis* (emphasis added)." It is just not possible that this last phrase could have been written with a purport of seriousness. (Almost every tribe and nation has its mythic history concerning the origins of the world.

## BOOK REVIEWS

Jewish written traditions go back to approximately 1,000 B.C. and their creation myths got finalized written form during this period as a theological answer to the Canaanite tribes which surrounded them.) Again in the same vein: "The Jews have invented more ideas, have made the world more intelligible, for a longer span and for more people than any other group." For a succinct statement that manages to obliterate such cultures of great antiquity as India and China and that annihilates the pervasive influence of Greek thought and Roman law, this sentence stands, I am sure, unchallenged. Such ignorance is particularly disturbing in a work where the author states his intention to write *sine ira et studio*. Finally, if I may indulge in one more example: "Jews are in a sense more human than anyone else: they have witnessed and taken part in more of the human career, they have recorded more of it, above all, suffered more of it, than any other people." This level of sentimentality and grandiose generalization, repeated throughout the text, is unworthy of the historical significance of the Jewish people.

The author does mention some sociological aspects of the American Jewish phenomenon, such as the vicissitudes of orthodox religious practice, the profound need for roots in terms of keeping the Jewish identity, and a theme that is meant to be at the basis of such phenomena as Jewish hippies and Jewish liberals, the guilt over success and the identification with the underdog. The Jewish character is approached from religious, psychological and historical avenues. All of this is interesting, and these are worthy topics for one musing about his social identity, yet I found nothing new in their presentation. To be informed, for instance, that circumcision is a symbolic castration puberty rite with clear oedipal implications is so obvious as to be meaningless. To be told that Jews are less numerous in small towns and cities and are, therefore, intermarrying with gentiles with a concomitant loss of Jewishness is a commonplace given scholarly support years ago, for instance in the work of Will Herberg.

Finally, in its presentation of the author's political opinions, the book's value is further diminished. Because of the seriousness of the race issue, I will present a lengthy quotation which summarizes, I believe, the author's point of view:

In terms of equity, the argument runs as follows: well-connected whites in the past have often gained positions over more qualified competitors in corporations and elsewhere. Negroes have no such connections. Why not give them a similar opportunity by granting them preference over whites, even over more qualified ones?

Such an argument treats Negroes and whites as groups with competing claims to be balanced, and not as individuals whose individual qualifications ought to be con-

sidered paramount. Past practice may make the disregard for individual qualifications in favor of group discrimination seem equitable. But it reinforces rather than eliminates group discrimination and, despite apparent advantages, harms the members of all groups, Injustice—even when compensatory—is never in the social interest.

“Injustice”—the word falls from the pen with apparent neutrality, yet it evokes the deepest emotions and, in this example, completely begs the question. Surely the author knows that beyond the distribution of jobs the questions that the black communities are concerned with have to do with the whole of our present national consciousness with its unexamined use of such words as “justice” and “equality.” To give social opportunity to those who have been robbed of what society has to give, namely, social recognition and therefore identity, is precisely the labor of justice. To concentrate solely on the theme of “personal qualifications” as the author does is to perpetuate an oppressive system. To reduce the soul searching which all thoughtful Americans are involved in to so shallow a level of discourse is particularly disappointing in one committed, as a psychoanalyst, to probing the depths of things. (American society had little difficulty recognizing its role and obligation in giving individual and preferential benefits to returning veterans after World War II. Did anyone speak then of the great social evil we would be perpetrating against individuals who might not have been in the armed services? Obviously there are valid differences of opinion here. What is at issue is the simplistic approach the author evidences.)

In short, the subject matter deserves more careful study; it is a necessary topic, for man must learn more about his family.

Address: 10 East 76th Street  
New York, N. Y. 10021