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Daniel Gasman – Third Rejoinder to Professor Robert J. Richards:

Haeckel's Anti-Semitism as Revealed in the Hermann Bahr Interview.

The theme that dominates the recent writing of Professor Robert Richards, that Ernst Haeckel did not manifest any serious anti-Semitic sentiments seems to be at variance with what Haeckel revealed in an interview on the subject of anti-Semitism conducted in 1894 by the art and literary critic, Hermann Bahr.¹ Bahr was a Monist and devoted follower of Haeckel, and he claimed for himself opposition to anti-Semitism, although the intellectual and political context he establishes for the interview suggest possible contradictions. Haeckel's remarks and the introductory comments by Bahr leading up to the interview provide a good insight into the way in which leading Monists viewed German culture and politics in the years around the turn of the twentieth century. Above all, the interview does not bear out the assertions of Richards that Haeckel was a philo-Semite and that he did not view the Jews in negative racial terms. Rather, in retrospect one can feel over the course of the entire discussion the early manifestations of a National Socialist outlook on the position of the Jews in German society. To be sure, if the Third Reich had never materialized, one could dismiss this chapter in Bahr's book as an example of the moody romanticism that

¹ Hermann Bahr, *Der Antisemitismus: ein internationales Interview*, Berlin: G. Fischer, 1894, 62-69.

pervaded Germany during that period of time and that might have disappeared with the birth of the twentieth century. But history inevitably must look backward from the vantage point and experience of the present, and it is in this light that the interview with Haeckel takes on a special significance.

Before actually meeting Haeckel, Bahr sets the scene and describes where he was staying in Jena and his impression of the city. Note that in the course of his discussion and in references to the people that he meets, no liberals, social democrats, or Jews appear. Rather, only extreme nationalists and one French proto-Fascist thinker are mentioned along with a reference to the ‘Rembrandt-Deutsche,’ the conception popularized in 1890 by Julius Langbehn in his book, *Rembrandt als Erzieher*, which was adopted by the Nazis as an admired statement of Aryan racism and was repeatedly published in the Third Reich.

[Bahr]: ‘I am staying at the “Bären,” [abbreviation for the fashionable Das Hotel Schwarzer Bär], where Luther once stayed and where last year Bismarck² spoke about his legacy to the German people. “It is a dangerous tendency today in the heart of Europe to be unenthusiastic about absolutes. What we have to strive for in the future is a strengthening of resolve in

² During his visit to Jena, Haeckel hosted Bismarck enthusiastically. Disregarding all customary academic procedures, Haeckel, in an impromptu gesture had an honorary degree of Doctor of Phylogeny conferred upon Bismarck at the time he delivered a speech to the students.

public opinion and in parliament.”... Outside, a few flowers nod, while I refresh myself after ... the journey, and a brown bust sparkingly reflects the brown wall, and I wonder if the bronze is of a student or a teacher or some poet. It is though Herr Friedrich Gottlob Schulze, the “founder of the provincial teaching academies in Jena.” One always learns something new.

I ask for a coach. But “there aren’t any coaches available today; the students have dispersed.” I stroll slowly through the city, towards its outer limits, towards the Bergstrasse, where [Haeckel’s] house stands.

I had once strolled here with Maurice Barrès,³ the clever proponent of “enthusiasm,” chatting and sight seeing along the narrow, quiet alleyways.... It is here [in Jena], in absolute devotion to the fatherland that the sacred passion for the Burschenschaften⁴ was born. Unique individuals discovered within themselves, the most powerful feelings, and without any outside assistance. What heroes! What artists! They didn’t have any inkling of our [modern] appliances.

I do not know if the students of today can equal them. [Bahr then goes on to say a few words of criticism of the students of his time who enjoy careers as government bureaucrats, but do not have the élan of the founders of the Burschenschaften].

³ Barrès was one of the principal ideological founders of French Fascism and this chance remark shows a link between the German Monists and proto-French Fascists; a connection that I discuss in my *Haeckel’s Monism and the Birth of Fascist Ideology*, New York, 1998. Barrès’ contribution to the origin of French Fascism is discussed in Zeev Sternhell, *Maurice Barrès et le nationalisme français, Paris, 1971*.

⁴ The German nationalistic student associations founded early in the 19th century.

Authentic descendants of the Burschenschaft are perhaps [found] only among the professors. Ernst Hackel is someone who is committed to freedom with courage and sincerity. One has only to recall how angry and daring he was when he ... sought, to come out against the “Weltanschauung of the New Direction,” with the energy of [precise], military-like objections.⁵

Young shimmering birch trees surround the peaceful house, simple and noble ... situated on a hill. The gardener works in the flowerbeds. A celebratory, pleasing stillness permeates the grounds.

[Haeckel] reclines on a large black sofa – next to a large table with books and manuscripts, catalogues, his “History of Creation”.... On his journey home from Italy he strained his foot, and it is painful when he moves. The room is wide, expansive, and open, and one feels as though one is in a bright forest, where the pleasing vegetation is not densely packed together; white blossoms caress the window.

He evokes nothing of a professor and has nothing of the “severe expression of the erudite,” that Schiller once found in Jena. He is all energy, freedom, and happiness.⁶ One could mistake him for a wanderer, a gymnast, or hunter, a person of the out of doors, who is contentedly active, passionate, healthy and upright. Just as Nietzsche might dream of such a

⁵ Bahr was alluding here to the educational changes in Prussia in the 1890s that restricted the teaching of evolution in the elementary schools. Haeckel had waged a determined campaign against the proposed changes in the curriculum.

⁶ Bahr seems to notice nothing of the tragic sense of life in Haeckel that Richards is now suggesting for Haeckel as his identifying quality in a forthcoming book, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, Chicago, 2008.

cheerfulness and I recall the Rembrandt-Deutsche⁷ when he described his “strong and mild heroes.” ...

He communicates his opinions and principles with enthusiastic zeal, like a collector exhibiting his possessions, continually racing ahead of himself, because he can't wait, and then always for a second and third time, [hoping] to make it possible to elucidate [all] the basic principles from every angle.'

[Haeckel]: “Naturally I won't be able to tell you anything new [about anti-Semitism]. Who could, regarding this question that has been discussed a thousand times? But, as for myself, I have at least the freedom of complete impartiality. [Haeckel now praises the Jews, as Richards suggests,⁸ but then immediately qualifies his remarks, so that it is apparent that his sentiments are actually on the side of anti-Semitism. Whatever support he voices for the Jews are along the lines of: ‘some of my best friends are Jews’]. On the one hand I have over the years been friendly with many Jews, whom I honor and value – they are completely wonderful, splendid people – so that the customary aspersions on the Jews don't have any effect on me, because I have a more rewarding experience. On the other hand, indeed, some of my best and most intelligent students are anti-Semitic, so that I must say from personal experience: one can get nowhere with ignorance and simplicity, and **do not agree with Mommsen who declares that anti-Semitism is an**

⁷ This is a reference to the nationalist writing of Julius Langbehn. For Langbehn and his importance for National Socialism, See Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, New York, 1961.

⁸ Robert J. Richards, ‘Haeckel's Alleged Anti-Semitism and Contributions to Nazi Biology,’ *Biological Theory* 2(1) 2007, 100. Richards selects only passages in the interview that might be construed as friendly to the Jews. But this leaves out most of the interview which expresses Haeckel's explicit defense of anti-Semitism and the international anti-Semitic movement.

aberration and an illness.⁹ Above all I cannot believe, all my understanding strives against it, that such a powerful, long lasting and great movement was possible without adequate justification.¹⁰ I lean towards the opinion of Schmoller's,¹¹ who correctly [states] that it is a national question – I fully agree with this. Religious and social [issues] appear to me of lesser significance. It is a racial question.¹² It cannot in any way be denied that in many ways we feel that the Jews are alien and they themselves feel alien among us – this however should not be taken as criticism of them: it is in their past, because of past historical conditions, and it could not have been any different. This must naturally lead to conflict during the present time, when nationalism is so powerful, and I believe this power of nationalism will continue to grow in the future, even if one must perhaps regret it from [the perspective] of superior cosmopolitan idealism.¹³ I have seen it again in

⁹ Theodore Mommsen was a prominent historian who had taken a stand against the anti-Semitism of Heinrich von Treitschke in the famous 'Berlin antisemitismstreit' between 1879 and 1881. Mommsen came to symbolize at the time the struggle against anti-Semitism in Germany and for Haeckel to declare opposition to Mommsen was at the same time to declare support for aggressive anti-Semitism.

¹⁰ In other words, this suggests that the Jews are responsible for their own persecution.

¹¹ Haeckel was referring to the distinguished German economist, Gustav von Schmoller.

¹² [emphasis-dg] Haeckel's remarks about race seem to negate the argument of Richards that Haeckel did not define the Jews in racial terms. In addition, Haeckel equates the national and the racial here, because he considers the Germans to be Aryans. Richards has written: "There is simply no reason to believe Haeckel to be racially anti-Semitic as Gasman [does];" in Michael Ruse (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to the Philosophy of Biology*, Cambridge 2007, 451.

¹³ The idea that the Jews are an alien force rooted in nature and race will also typify the beliefs of Adolf Hitler concerning the Jews. See Gasman, *The Scientific Origins of National Socialism*, London, 1971: 165 and passim. One should also bear in mind the close links between Haeckel and Jules Soury and Georges Vacher de Lapouge, two of the most notorious anti-Semitic writers in Europe. Both French authors had been translators of some of Haeckel's most important books and sustained a correspondence with Haeckel over many years. For more on this subject, see Gasman, *Haeckel's Monism and the Birth of Fascist Ideology*: chapters 3, 4.

Italy, when I recall in the year 1859, before Garibaldi, it never occurred to a Sicilian to have identified himself as Italian. Only in the north one began to be sensitive nationally. And it is this way in all countries. Cosmopolitanism is still quite far off. At present, nationalistic sentiments are growing and strengthening everywhere.

Except in France ... especially in Paris. There, young people don't want to recognize anything about nationalism, and the conventionally modern [person] thinks only as a cosmopolitan.

But in the end this is only in one city. **Today, everything, more than in the past, reflects nationalism. Thus anti-Semitism becomes quite comprehensible – naturally, not anti-Semitic baiting, that everyone must regret and condemn; Ahlwardtismus cannot be supported by a decent and educated person;¹⁴ but it is understandable that one can no longer tolerate the alien nature of the Jews alongside the German people, to deny then that which is specifically Jewish and to instruct them about German habits and customs, so that in all regards they would be the same as the people among whom they are living. This is the justifiable purpose of anti-Semitism, that the Jews will be emancipated from their strangeness, and that they will fully assimilate with us – this is what must be demanded by anyone who feels and thinks nationalistically.**¹⁵

¹⁴ Support for the extreme anti-Semitism of Hermann Ahlwardt, a notorious publicist claiming economic sabotage on the part of the Jews against Germany.

¹⁵ In other words, for Haeckel the Jews have to disappear. In retrospect this idea of the disappearance of the Jews – ‘one can no longer tolerate the alien nature of the Jews

[Bahr then intercedes with the following comment]: ‘But do you not believe that this internal assimilation will be more retarded than advanced by the anti-Semitic movement?’

[And Haeckel responds]: **“Every movement has its advantages and its dangers. I believe that it is a virtue of anti-Semitism,¹⁶ that it [serves to] heighten [the consciousness] of the Jews and the Germans: the Jews must abandon their peculiarities and become fully German in custom, need, and feeling. This must be uncompromisingly striven for and what must be prevented is the constant immigration of new and frequently morally dangerous elements from the east that disturbs their training in becoming Germans. Indeed in the interests of the many outstanding, honest and honorable Jews among us, I am referring to special difficulties connected with the emigration of Jews from the east, and I ask if respectable and cultivated Jews themselves, who see themselves honestly as Germans, [should realize] that this miserable group of people is very much not desired, because it awakens mistrust and**

alongside the German people’ – a demand insisted upon so strongly by Haeckel, will take on a life of its own as Germany enters the Twentieth century and evolves towards the Third Reich. Haeckel himself does not speak in terms of physically harming the Jews, but Jules Soury and Georges Vacher de Lapouge, Haeckel’s disciples and translators, did advocate the ‘scientific’ destruction of the Jews.

¹⁶ It is, of course, contradictory for Haeckel to declare that he personally is free of anti-Semitism and at the same time to offer such unconditional support to the anti-Semitic movement. This also negates the comments of Richards that suggest Haeckel was not anti-Semitic. Richards’ comments that Haeckel’s attitude toward the Russian Jews was mostly benign seem meaningless when measure against Haeckel’s racially inspired and inflammatory rhetoric. Richards had written: ‘[Haeckel’s] tangential reservations about Eastern-Jewish immigration were not racial or biological, certainly not of the sort favored by the Nazis, but behavioral and attitudinal, more in keeping with the distaste of the German Mandarins for the lower classes of any sort.’ Richards, ‘Ernst Haeckel’s Alleged Anti-Semitism,’ 100. But we have seen just a few lines above how Haeckel defined the ‘Jewish problem’ in racial terms.

hinders total acceptance [of the Jews] by our people.¹⁷ In this instance humanitarianism can only hurt, and I believe, that we have to protect ourselves energetically from the Russian Jews, not because they are Jews,¹⁸ but because they are incompatible with our customs – just as in California there are protections against the Chinese; unfortunately, the love of ‘everything that bears a human face’ does not have [good] practical consequences. Last year on the ship that brought me to England, I saw such Russian emigrants; one can’t fathom their filth and strangeness, and the English are quite correct not to let them emigrate.¹⁹ Indeed, it is in the interest of the educated Jews to oppose such filthy elements that provoke only hatred and bitterness – I emphasize this emphatically because I regard these decent and superior Jews as important members of German culture: because it should not be forgotten that they always stood resolutely for enlightenment and freedom against reactionary [forces], reliable champions, against the Dunkelmänner, [opponents of enlightenment] and especially given the threats during these perilous times, we cannot dispense with their

¹⁷ Haeckel employs the commonly used word Volk and not Nation to denote the Germans. The word Volk has the connotation in German of deeper organic bonds than simply the word Nation that suggests nationality as a strictly legal rather than an organic and biological phenomenon.

¹⁸ This comment about not wishing to exclude the Russian Jews because they are Jews seems totally disingenuous on the part of Haeckel.

¹⁹ Haeckel seems uninformed, because at the time there was a steady stream of Eastern European Jewry into England. In any event, these remarks by Haeckel about the Russian Jews are infinitely more racially anti-Semitic than the account of Richards would suggest.

demonstrated courage, at a time when once again Papal forces are rearing their heads.²⁰

²⁰ This afterthought of Haeckel is somewhat contradictory and problematical, even if sounding enlightened and tolerant. If the Jews are a race how can they in fact be totally assimilated into the Aryan race, the term that Haeckel used to identify the Germans. The Nazis came to the conclusion that in fact such an approach to the so-called Jewish problem was not possible and arrived ultimately at a radically different, yet linked, genocidal solution to the Jewish presence in Germany and in Europe generally.