

David NIRENBERG, *Anti-Judaism. The Western Tradition*, New York/London,
Norton & Company, 2014, 624 pp.

This book invites readers to travel to a “grand narrative” zone. *Anti-Judaism* indirectly shows the necessity of building wide and ambitious discourses in order to unfold a range of issues that otherwise would remain in the darkness. The subtitle of this book already indicates the author’s maximalist goal. This reads nothing less than *The Western Tradition*. Such important target is only within the reach of very few. Nevertheless, nothing in this book reminds of Hegelianism. On the contrary, this book comes to reinforce that thesis (with which I agree) about the possibility and even the urgency of thinking and writing far-reaching pragmatic texts with neither metaphysical nor ontological grandiloquent support.

In my opinion, this book accomplishes its promises. Nirenberg relates the history of the anti-Judaism from the ancient world¹ to the present. It is quite different thing to agree with the conceptual tools Nirenberg invites us to use so as to take this long journey. But in this respect the author also hits the target. Nirenberg elaborates some “figures of Judaism” to avoid falling in distortions when explaining things like the historical and material anti-Judaism or idealistic one, whatever it could be. These “figures” allow him to manage the different and complicated realms in which Judaism was considered as being the main threat of any determinate present. In this sense, this book reminds us some weberian methodological inspiration, although it is far from assuming the weberian celebrated thesis about Judaism and Capitalism (p. 440 ss.) However, these figures of Judaism are close to the weberian ideal-types. This methodology is supported by an implicit recurrent thesis: the question of anti-Judaism hardly ever was based on any real presence of Jews. Thus, understanding the anti-Judaism implies understanding the “figures of Judaism”, regardless any factual and physical presence of Jewish “bodies”. Any statistical, quantitative, or demographic focusing would mislead to erroneous and aporetic conclusions. Thanks to these “figures of Judaism” Nirenberg overcomes and bridges the inherent difficulties between material and ideological Judaism, as well as the internal contradictions within the topics which has been long configuring the secular anti-Judaism. In page 420 our author writes down a synthesis of what I am meaning. It is worth transcribing the entire paragraph: “These apparent contradictions should not be too surprising. After all, early Christianity had also generated views of the Jews’ role in history as different as those of the Manichaeans, who saw Jews as witnesses to the demonic origins of the material world, and Augustine’s, who cast them as essential witnesses to God’s incarnation in his own creation. Nor had centuries of theologians seen any insurmountable difficulty in simultaneously understanding Judaism as too realist (“carnal Israel”) and too symbolic (“the letter kills”). As in Christianity so in

¹ Chapter 1. The Ancient World: Egypt, Exodus, Empire to chapter 13. Modernity thinks with Judaism.

Idealism: different deployments of Judaism within dialectics could produce seemingly contradictory results, but these contradictions did not undermine confidence of the dialectic itself”.

But it is only at the end of the book when Nirenberg offers the group of thinkers that has been inspiring his own work and has been indirectly speaking to along his text. Some of these influential interlocutors are Horkheimer and Adorno (mainly their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*), Walter Benjamin, and Erich Auerbach, whose *Figure* directly influences Nirenberg’s strategy. Actually, he quotes this inspiring extract of *Figure* three pages before the end (p. 468): “Our purpose was to show how on the basis of its semantic development a word may grow into a historical situation and give rise to structures that will be effective for many centuries”.

Some lines before, Nirenberg had claimed that “Throughout this book I have tried to show how, across several thousands years, myriad lands, and many different spheres of human activity, people have used ideas about Jews and Judaism to fashion the tools with which they construct the reality of their world. The goal of my project, like Horkheimer and Adorno’s, is to encourage reflection about our “projective behavior”, that is, about the ways in which our deployment of concepts into and onto the world might generate “pathological” fantasies of Judaism. And my choice of method owes something to Auerbach’s conviction that the study of a given moment, problem, or even a single word in the distant past can teach us something about a much longer history, extending even to our own”.

Thus, Nirenberg seems to return to some old questions already remaining opened since mid20th century, despite all the efforts to solve them implemented by the contemporary philosophy, from the post-structuralism and postmodernism to the present days. Nirenberg suggests that, perhaps, even the way in which certain Jewish philosophers intended to overcome any anti-Semitism has engaged itself with anti-Semitic roots. In this sense, Nirenberg writes coldly about Hannah Arendt, whom thesis of co-responsibility of the Jews he considers surprisingly wrong (p. 463). Such a diagnostic suggests some sort of long-lived “convert syndrome”, by the way largely present in the Hispanic context and, as Nirenberg demonstrates, profoundly influential along the history of Western tradition. Our author also analyses Marx’s philosophy on Judaism. This can be considered as a case of convert family syndrome. Nirenberg invokes the fact that Marx’s father conversion was the key to his success as a lawyer in the world of the German bourgeois commercial society (p. 438). One can hardly help thinking about the parallelism with the Spaniard Alonso de Cartagena and his father, converted from Judaism, thanks to the Ferrer’s “convincing” preaches. Nirenberg also analyses the problem of the Spanish converts, devoting the chapter 6 to this topic (“The Extinction of Spain’s Jews and the Birth of Its Inquisition”).

The book draws a strict chronology argument, in which some thesis recurrently appears so that the argument maintains an harmonic unity thanks to internal allusions within different topics. For instance, Pauline’s binary dictum about the “Letter” and the “Spirit, the work and the grace, the Pharisee and the Christian, spiritual circumcision and flesh, comes out time and time again, not in a way to tediously repeat the same idea, but to unfold the multiple shapes adopted by the figures of Judaism across the history of Western Tradition. Some elements of all this arise within Lutheran and Calvinistic Reformation (chapter 7), within Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* (chap. 8), and among many diverse philosophies as those of Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Marx, or Weber.

Almost every chapter is preceded by some pertinent *motto*, each one quite ex-

pressive about the subsequent content. Nevertheless, one can't help feeling a little puzzled when after many intellectual quotations coming before each chapter, the last one² is preceded by these hateful words: "The age of rampant Jewish intellectualism is now at an end", by Joseph Goebbels.

Although Nirenberg himself declares the joy he would take in being proved wrong, one must say, as an intellectual and philosopher, that there are no easy arguments to make him glad. However, any reader well versed in some kind of contemporary important books, has in Nirenberg's volume a superb antidote against Carl Schmitt and Heidegger's current inheritors.

One looks forward to the Spanish translation of this essential book. We all, Western and no Western people, are in need of this new kind of sensible "grand narratives".

Rafael Herrera Guillén

² Chapter 13. Modernity thinks with Judaism.