

# **A Review of 'American Naturalism and the Jews'**

Stephen J. Mexal

Summer 2010

*American Naturalism and the Jews: Garland, Norris, Dreiser, Wharton, and Cather.* By Donald Pizer. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008. xv + 88 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$30 (cloth).

Literary naturalism was a form that found its moment in America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Naturalist writers like Frank Norris, Jack London, Theodore Dreiser, Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, and later Mike Gold and Richard Wright were interested in the myriad ways in which individual agency could be usurped by factors outside the control of the human. Literary naturalism sometimes involved a loose application of Charles Darwin or Herbert Spencer, expressed as anxiety over the atavistic return of a repressed, subhuman savagery. But it just as often involved a loose application of Karl Marx and other social scientists and a concern over the way in which modern capitalism could appropriate individual agency. Naturalism was often progressive in its politics, especially in its examination of how gender codes (in Wharton and Chopin), capitalism (in Crane and Norris), and race (in Gold and Wright) could all easily usurp the autonomy of the individual. But its politics were also not *necessarily* progressive, and the wide Spencerian streak running through much of American naturalism has lent itself to a reductive and binary view of racial and civilizational “development.” In *American Naturalism and the Jews*, Donald Pizer offers a compelling and insightful examination of the anti-Semitic attitudes of Hamlin Garland, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Edith Wharton, and Willa Cather, writers otherwise known for their progressive social viewpoints.

Pizer suggests his subjects’ anti-Semitism is not a result of “a flawed personality,” but is instead the result of a social milieu conducive to ethnocentrism (p. xi). Pizer focuses on two major social events of the late 1800s that he feels were most responsible for fomenting anti-Semitism: Populism, with its consequent demonization of Jews as parasitic economic exploiters, and the East Coast patrician revulsion at the mass migration of Eastern European Jews. The chapter on Garland examines his 1892 novel, *A Spoil of Office*, as well as his writings on Henry Ford, for evidence of his anti-Semitism. In these texts, Pizer argues, Garland whitewashes the anti-Semitism of his subjects, normalizing anti-Semitic attitudes. By not acknowledging the pervasive anti-Semitism of Henry Ford or the rhetoric of the Populists, Garland expresses “a nonactivist anti-Semitism in as seemingly discreet and inoffensive a manner as possible” (p. 14).

The chapter on Frank Norris traces the anti-Semitism present in a number of Norris’s published works, including his most viciously anti-Semitic portrayal of a Jew in his 1899 novel *McTeague*. Intriguingly, Pizer argues that this racism is a product of Norris’s University of California education, when he took courses from Joseph Le Conte, Charles Mills Gayley, and Bernard Moses. All three scholars were committed to an evolutionary explanation of human development that lent itself “to a defense of the concept of racial hierarchies,” a concept that shows up repeatedly in Norris’s later fiction (p. 19).

It is in the chapter on Theodore Dreiser that the book’s exploration of public progressivism and private anti-Semitism blossoms. Pizer chronicles a series of interviews given by Dreiser to several Jewish journals in the 1920s in which Dreiser refutes the

principal anti-Semitic arguments of the day, analyzing these public comments in conjunction with his 1919 drama about New York Jewish life, *The Hand of the Potter*. And yet after a 1926 break with his Jewish publisher Horace Liveright, Dreiser's latent anti-Semitism became overt. Near the end of his career, he continually betrayed the progressive ideals of his own texts by sympathizing with anti-Semitic, and occasionally fascistic, attitudes. The final chapter, on Wharton and Cather, reads *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Professor's House* (1925) as examples of the Jewish threat perceived by many Eastern patricians. These authors, Pizer argues, had a patrician distrust of the supposed Jewish emphasis on economics and were repulsed by the immigration of Eastern European Jews.

Pizer's book is a tight, energetic work, meticulously researched and elegantly written. The principal drawback of *American Naturalism and the Jews* is one Pizer cheerfully admits to at the outset: that it is not really about literary naturalism at all. This is disappointing, not because "naturalism" becomes little more than an occasion for grouping together five disparate writers (indeed, as Pizer also concedes, Garland and Cather are rarely if ever considered naturalists), but because there were a number of opportunities where Pizer might have theorized a connection between the practice of literary naturalism and the practice of anti-Semitism. His historical argument might have benefited from a broader theoretical analysis of racialism in literary naturalism. Nevertheless, this is an excellent and original work of scholarship documenting anti-Semitism in five American writers at the turn of the twentieth century, one that makes an important contribution to American literary and racial historiography. Pizer ably demonstrates that these anti-Semitic impulses were not the result of personal biases, but rather the product of their unique historical moment, creating texts in which anti-Semitic prejudice existed alongside progressive political ideals.

Stephen J. Mexal  
California State University, Fullerton

The Ted K Archive

Stephen J. Mexal

A Review of 'American Naturalism and the Jews'  
Summer 2010

Journal of American Ethnic History, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Summer 2010), pp. 131-133

[jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jamerethnhist.29.4.0131](http://jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jamerethnhist.29.4.0131)

University of Illinois Press on behalf of the Immigration & Ethnic History Society

**[www.thetedkarchive.com](http://www.thetedkarchive.com)**