

James J. Conway discusses his translation of Hermann Bahr's essential historic text, Antisemitism.

How would you describe Hermann Bahr's book *Antisemitism*?

The original German edition of *Antisemitism* (*Der Antisemitismus: Ein internationales Interview*) was published in Berlin in 1894, and it is a collection of interviews that Austrian writer and critic Hermann Bahr had conducted with various public figures across Europe the previous year which had been printed in the Viennese newspaper, the *Deutsche Zeitung*. It is Bahr's attempt to take the temperature of the continent, to gather a range of opinion, to depict modern antisemitism at a critical period in its early development.

What made you want to translate this book?

I was already fascinated by Hermann Bahr as an apostle of modernism in German-speaking Europe, and I had considered translating some of his fiction. Then I heard about *Antisemitism*, and I was intrigued by both the subject matter and the interview form, so it was already on the 'maybe' pile. I was in Italy when I started reading it, on a bus heading for the airport in Milan, and I knew immediately I had to translate it. For a non-fiction work, what really struck me was its literary quality. I was instantly captivated by this immersion in the age, its sense of place, its pan-European perspective, the idea of being on a journey – elements that were even more apparent because I was traveling across Europe at the time. Bahr is an erudite and terribly well-connected guide, generously introducing you to fascinating people as they discuss the most contentious issue of their age. It was baffling to me that such an important document had never been translated. On that Italian bus the task of bringing the book to English-speaking readers suddenly seemed urgently necessary. And it fit perfectly with the Rixdorf Editions remit of rediscovering progressive, prophetic German texts of that period.

Who was Hermann Bahr?

By rights Hermann Bahr should be far better known in the English-speaking world. He was an Austrian writer, critic, playwright, journalist and creative catalyst who was extraordinarily sensitive to changes in European culture. He was born in Linz in 1863 and is largely associated with Vienna and the café-dwelling avant-garde 'Jung Wien' group, but he lived in Paris for a while, spent time in Berlin, and travelled extensively throughout the continent. He was curious, combative, he straddled culture and politics and had connections everywhere. One of the few comparable figures who comes to mind is his contemporary, the German writer, publisher and diarist Harry Graf Kessler. He and Bahr knew everyone, they could read a French, English or German newspaper and not only understand it but contextualise the references, at a time when that international perspective was incredibly rare. Bahr wrote extensively for and about the stage, as well as fiction, including the novel *The Good School* which reflected his immersion in French Decadence and Huysmans in particular. Another essential text was an essay called 'Overcoming Naturalism', which proposed a path to guide literary culture away from what was then its dominant mode. And – this is where we come in – he worked as a journalist for a Vienna newspaper, the *Deutsche Zeitung*, whose publisher had given him a highly generous brief.

What were Bahr's own views on Jews and antisemitism?

By 1893 Bahr was very much opposed to antisemitism, but it's important to note that he had undergone a transformation. He came from an unremarkable Austrian Catholic middle-class background, then as a student in the early 1880s he joined a *Burschenschaft*, which is like a fraternity but more political, very often right wing. The one he belonged to was associated with the pan-German movement, which held that the German Empire and Austria should merge, but without Austria's empire – an idea the Nazis would obviously later embrace. Bahr was a troublemaker and came into the orbit of the fiercely antisemitic Georg von Schönerer, later a major influence on Hitler. Bahr was even arrested for putting up antisemitic slogans and insulting Jews in a café. His later renunciation of antisemitism is difficult to pinpoint, but came around the late 1880s. One factor is that he came to see Jews, in Berlin especially – and this was the twilight of the city's great literary salons, many hosted by Jewish women – as guardians of German culture at a time of unchecked materialism. By the 1890s he was a friend of early Zionist Theodor Herzl and surrounded by the numerous Jewish writers of Jung Wien. The year after *Antisemitism* appeared he married a Jewish actress.

What was the context in which Bahr was writing?

His book came at a critical time, when antisemitism was evolving from a centuries-long, almost folk bigotry with predominantly religious associations to become a truly racial prejudice, weaponised by the rise of nationalism and pseudo-scientific race studies, particularly in France and Germany. Naturally there was anti-Jewish hatred elsewhere in Europe, like the Russian Empire where appalling pogroms caused widespread migration. But around the time of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870-71, from which emerged the unified German Empire and the French Third Republic, we see the flowering of politicised, racial antisemitism. Jews were ascribed some manner of ineradicable 'evil' in their genes, viewed as foreign elements despite having been part of European culture for millennia. You find new forms of conspiracy theory, the idea of Jews as treacherous, covert string-pullers as reflected in the later forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

In Germany the book followed two decades of growing agitation, a huge number of anti-Jewish publications, and a dispute among historians including the vocally antisemitic Heinrich von Treitschke, and in the other corner Theodor Mommsen, one of Bahr's interviewees. Predatory market practices were wreaking devastation in societies that had changed little in centuries and for a section of the population, it was all the Jews' fault. By the 1890s, multiple political parties were campaigning solely on anti-Jewish hatred; it was the peak of political antisemitism prior to the rise of the Nazis. August Bebel, and to an extent Bahr himself, suggested that the real target of the antisemites was capitalist excess, and that they had simply erred in conflating this with Jews and once you allowed socialism to occupy the emotional space previously monopolised by antisemitism, anti-Jewish sentiment would disappear. In France we find ourselves on the eve of the Dreyfus Affair, and the book reveals the fault lines through French society which would open up and reveal the true depths of antisemitism in the country. But it was also the time of the Panama Scandal, which is somewhat forgotten now but referenced numerous times in the book. France had sunk vast sums in the failed first attempt to build a canal across Panama in a project riddled with corruption and people like Édouard Drumont, author of the key antisemitic text *La France Juive*, accused prominent Jews of underhand dealings in the affair. Both Bahr and Theodor Herzl went to Paris to cover the story for their respective newspapers. Other countries that Bahr covers in his book had smaller Jewish populations – almost non-existent in

Norway, for instance – and while antisemitism was certainly not unknown, it didn't have the vehemence or the political apparatus it had acquired in France and Germany.

In what form did the interviews originally appear?

The interviews that Bahr conducted with what would eventually be 38 writers, politicians and other figures across Europe began appearing in the *Deutsche Zeitung* in March 1893 and ran for six months. He started in Berlin before moving on to Paris, and collectively France and Germany make up three quarters of the series. But you also had Britain, Ireland, Spain, Belgium and Norway. Bahr's inspiration was *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire*, an 1891 newspaper series and book by French writer Jules Huret in which he interviewed some of his country's most prestigious literary figures, including Zola, Maupassant and Verlaine. What Bahr responded to in Huret's work, and brought to his own series, was a sense of time and place and sensibility and nuance and gesture – all of the things that evoke an individual and their environment. He was keen to capture his subjects in unguarded moments, draw out things they might not wish to disclose, and it is likely that some of them had literally never been interviewed in this way. The series wrapped in September 1893 and was published in book form the next year by the relatively new S. Fischer Verlag, now one of Germany's biggest publishers. The title of the series and subsequent book – *Der Antisemitismus: Ein internationales Interview* – contains three words that would have been quite new to contemporary readers. The term *Antisemitismus* had been popularised by German writer Wilhelm Marr a decade or so earlier, the adjective *international* was adopted around the time of unification, while *das Interview* was an even more recent borrowing, with the first German usage recorded in 1887. Bahr uses it as a noun as well as a verb, *interviewen*, just as Germans today will *googeln* or *skypen*.

How did the series reflect journalistic practice in Bahr's time?

The articles were presented in the form of the *Feuilleton*, which is a slightly confusing French loan word in the context of German-language newspapers because it is used in two different ways. In a present-day German broadsheet today you will have a 'Feuilleton' section, equivalent to the arts section in English-language papers. But the *Feuilleton* is also a form of first-person article that was, and is, often printed in a dedicated position in German newspapers, often the first page. In it the writer discusses his or her own take on the events of the day, or far more personal, dare I say whimsical observations about people and places in the city. This form gave Bahr plenty of latitude to pursue digressions and bring himself into the work, which he exercised liberally. You're always aware of his presence and if Bahr encounters someone he knows, we get the entire story of their association. But he also greatly expanded the potential of the form, and really exploded out of this *Feuilleton* format to produce a study of extraordinary scope and significance.

What were the challenges in translating this book?

The biggest challenge was simply navigating the hundreds of names and places and figures, and references in Spanish and French and other languages, to orient myself in this deluge of detail. It's a deep dive into the public affairs of the time and many of the names were unfamiliar to me, and I thought it was important to provide notes. The research sometimes took me to dark places, and my search history certainly has a few eye-opening terms. Bahr throws out these names in the expectation that his contemporary audience will recognise them, which creates a compelling intimacy, but not glossing them would have been asking too much of a present-day reader. I ended up

drowning in endnotes and it left me with a hunger for something not at all journalistic. That's when I decided to translate a short work I had been wanting to tackle for some time, *The Night of Tino of Baghdad* by Else Lasker-Schüler. And the fact that it finds her exploring a particularly Semitic identity, both Jewish and Arab, also made it a compelling counterpoint to *Antisemitism*. Stylistically, the challenge with Bahr's book lay in trying to capture the flavour of conversation between prominent figures of the era, many of them at the top of their rhetorical game, in a way that might have been expressed in the English of the time. In preparation I loosely browsed a few late Victorian texts to get a sense for syntax, register, tone, idioms, especially in dialogue. There are some abrupt stylistic changes in the book, with parts that are more sentimental and lyrical, others more like a cursory briefing, or for Maximilian Harden a parody of the journalist's own notoriously baroque style.

Who were the interviewees?

What a range of people and back stories – arch-bohemian Spanish writer Alejandro Sawa, the German-Scottish gay anarchist, John Henry Mackay, contrarian novelist Alphonse Daudet well into his decline, exiled provocateur Henri Rochefort, and the radical Annie Besant, who had taken control of the Theosophical Society after the death of Madame Blavatsky. Even Henrik Ibsen pops his head in briefly. Having German Social Democrat leader August Bebel was a coup, so too polymath Ernst Haeckel, whose popular science studies could be found on millions of German bookshelves. You have the odd bore, but also people like French journalist Séverine, who turned out to be a fascinating and admirable individual. She was hugely prolific and a tireless defender of the downtrodden in French society in both word and deed. Bahr's account is coloured by his issues with women, presenting her as someone unable to divorce sentiment from intellect in her work. But she is one of the most insightful interviewees, and one of the few who is able to offer a long view of antisemitism and its historical development. Then there's Gustave Cluseret, one of the most outspoken antisemites among Bahr's respondents. We find him late in life as a jobbing artist but even in the 1890s he belongs to a different age, with a life story that encompasses the 1848 revolt, Crimean War, Italian wars of unification, American Civil War, the Fenian movement and the Commune. It's just a crazy story, so I was disappointed to discover there isn't a full-length English biography of him.

What can the book tell us about present-day antisemitism?

Where do you start? Bahr's book reveals the earliest stages of tropes and processes that are very much present today, including attacks on Jewish institutions and individuals in France, bitter contention about Holocaust commemoration in Poland, the resurgence of aggressive anti-Jewish sentiment in Hungary, ongoing controversies within the British Labour Party, newly emboldened antisemitism in the US, ceaseless disputes trying to locate the point at which legitimate criticism of Israel shades into antisemitism, dog whistles about globalism and cultural Marxism in mainstream media and a vast network of undiluted antisemitism online. It is the persistence of conspiracy theories and the imagery of rapacious Jews destroying society that is particularly striking. Bahr's text shows unscrupulous politicians and media outlets pandering to the worst, most bigoted elements of their constituencies, just as they do now. But you also see antisemitism with much less of the taboo value it has today. Most disturbing were the respondents who suggested that if you just ignore antisemites they will go away. And we know how well that turned out.

How else does the book resonate today?

It would be disappointing if this book were seen only in the context of anti-Jewish hatred because it reveals – and this is a crucial function – the nature and mechanisms of prejudice as a whole, of exclusionary ethno-nationalism, of demonisation of minorities. Naturally there are specificities to antisemitism, but to a degree the type of minority is almost interchangeable. The legitimate grievances of workers who fell under the wheels of the Second Industrial Revolution were exploited and redirected toward Jews, just as today those sidelined by neo-liberalism are urged to direct their anger at migrants, at refugees, at asylum seekers. Some figures have particular resonance. Hermann Ahlwardt features prominently although few Germans would recognise the name today. He was one of the most confrontational characters political antisemitism had to offer, unhinged, barely coherent; even the Nazis ignored him when they came to construct their pantheon of ideological ancestors. But he was elected to the Reichstag and used parliamentary privilege to air rumours and fabrications about public scandals that always had some Jewish component. He spread conspiracy theories and slandered freely, which made him a hero to certain sections of the population. You can certainly see a similarly irrational appeal among right-wing populist figures today. It's all id, all animus. It is hugely dispiriting to read these reports from over 120 years ago and realise that people fall for *exactly* the same act over and over again. Bahr's thesis of antisemitism as a stimulant or pathology also feels highly contemporary in an age when rational analysis is often secondary to the feeling evoked by events, with the focus of some news outlets determined by spontaneous sentiment.

Where does *Antisemitism* fit in with the other books you've translated?

This is the third book of non-fiction I've translated for Rixdorf Editions. Curiously the non-fiction works are all by men, and all relate at least in part to Berlin, and all the fiction titles are by women, although it was never planned that way. If I were to define a unifying theme in the non-fiction works it would be disclosure, with each author revealing things the reader was unlikely to encounter otherwise. In Magnus Hirschfeld's *Berlin's Third Sex* it is the lives of sexual minorities, for Jugendstil architect August Endell in *The Beauty of Metropolis* it is a way of looking at the city itself to reveal its surprising aesthetic bounty. Bahr is operating at a higher altitude, but in the section on Berlin he is very specific about locations, and it's highly instructive to be able to visit those sites for my research. For example: Bahr's first interview, at the home of writer Friedrich Spielhagen, took place a stone's throw from what was later the army headquarters where Hitler presented his secret plans for 'Lebensraum' in the east in 1933, and where Stauffenberg was executed after his coup attempt toward the end of the war. Making those connections, experiencing that density and layering of history in physical form is one of the most fascinating aspects of these translations.

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