

# Marcel Mauss's 'Internal Critique of the "Legend of Abraham"'

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**Abstract:** This introduces the first English translation of Marcel Mauss's article, 'Critique interne de la "Légende de l'Abraham"', published in 1926 in the *Revue des études juives*. In suggesting ways in which the translation offers anglophone scholars new perspectives on Mauss's thought, it explains how his sophisticated textual exegesis of the Legend of Abraham drew on nineteenth-century scholars such as Salomon Munk, but also how it above all involved a critique of deeply racist currents of European social thought. In particular, Mauss challenged a racist anthropology of African societies that became known as the 'Hamitic hypothesis' and linked it with the agitation over the 'Jewish Question' that continued to persist and was even growing in the world around him. A fundamental argument of his essay is that the social category of 'race' is not a category that denotes civility, but a system of categorization that stems from an analysis he deems 'wanton'.

**Keywords:** anthropology of Africa, anti-Semitism, Legend of Abraham, Marcel Mauss, race, racism, social categories

In 1926, Marcel Mauss published an article entitled 'Critique interne de la "Légende d'Abraham"' in the *Revue des études juives*. He 'gifted' it to an old teacher, Israël Lévi, Grand Rabbi of France and editor of the *Revue*, in celebration of his seventieth birthday. Here we present an English version, albeit almost a century later.

Translations of Mauss over the last six decades reflect an increasing recognition, in an anglophone academic context, of the value and scholarly influence of his sociological approach. Three of his works have become especially prominent in this context – his essay on the gift (1925a, tr. 1954), his lectures on bodily techniques (1935, tr. 1973) and his paper on the person as a category of the human mind (1938, tr. 1979). Over the last ten years or so, other parts of Mauss's vast output have been produced in English via the British Centre of Durkheimian Studies, notably his thesis on prayer (1909, tr. 2003) and his manual of ethnography (1947, tr. 2007).



It is well known that Mauss was the nephew of the founder of disciplinary sociology, Émile Durkheim, and is often seen not just as younger but as less austere. In any case, after his uncle's death in 1917, Mauss worked to renew the Durkheimian sociological programme. Essentially, he attempted to understand social phenomena in relation both to their particular contextual totalities and to a diverse wide-ranging ethnological field. It is this simultaneous process of internal/external critique that makes Mauss's rethinking of social categories so illuminating. He applied his critical faculty to issues such as economics, technology and its relation with the body, and personhood and the self. Potentially, his approach could have been applied to the interpretation of any sort of social category, though it has to be wondered if his ideas went far beyond his academic training. His insights into social phenomena were shaped not just by his comprehensive knowledge of sociology and anthropology and his proficiency in languages, but by his life experiences, especially those of the Great War.

It is also worth noting how his pedagogical approach comes across in his lectures, writings and museum work. He tends to curate for the student a disruptive journey, involving the presentation of exotic and seemingly unrelated facts. This leads to a feeling of less certainty about the social phenomena in question, but in the process to the achievement of a more mature critical perspective on them. It is this approach of destabilization that has been so useful for the discipline of social anthropology, as well as influential in informing the development of structuralism and beyond. An educative technique that Mauss consistently employed was to contaminate the supposedly natural distinction between the social categories of 'primitive' and 'civilized'.

The translation of the 'Critique interne' offers anglophone scholars new perspectives on Mauss's thought that we see as important for three reasons. The piece is first of all a sophisticated textual exegesis of the Legend of Abraham. At the same time, it provides insights into the intellectual and discursive milieu of the European interwar period, in particular helping to bring out conflict over the idea of race and Mauss's place within this struggle. Finally, then, and perhaps what matters most, his essay operates as an argument revealing how the social category of 'race' is not a category that denotes civility, but a system of categorization that stems from an analysis he deems 'wanton'. This insight is prophetically haunting for late modern readers who, looking back, understand the role of racial exceptionalism in influencing the catastrophe that was about to befall Europe. It is nonetheless with each of the three points in mind that we journey into Mauss's text.

## Commentary

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts... (Schmitt 2005: 36)

Mauss begins by distancing himself from the 'critical school' that had hegemonized biblical scholarship in France and Germany at the time of his article's publication. He does not explicitly mention the names of the writers of the critical school and only gives the example of two essays published in *Revue de l'histoire des religions*. But readers can refer to a study by Ivan Strenski (1997: 53–81, 95–115 and chapter 3), as well as to the biography of Mauss by Marcel Fournier (2006: 38–48). Here, let us make do with some preliminary remarks.

According to Strenski (1997: 66), the Jewish modernist position in metropolitan France during Durkheim's time was carved out by James Darmesteter, who thought – in line with his teacher, Ernest Renan – that traditional Judaism 'contained the seeds of a true universal religion', which needed to be teased out of the teachings of the prophets. It is important to note that these metaphors of the 'root to the tree' and/or the 'seed to the plant' echo Paul's Letter to the Romans, Chapters 9 to 11. Driven by the imperative to purify religion of 'superstition and magic' and make it conform to the spirit of science, Darmesteter, as a rationalist/modernist (Strenski's words), opposed the ritualizing tendencies of the priesthood. But whether we look at writers divided up by Strenski (1997: 99) into 'Jews who studied Judaism' and 'Gentiles who studied Judaism', what remains certain is that many of them operated under 'the magical spell of Christianity's historical success' (Jacob Taubes 2010: 46).<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it is not so easy to conjure away magic as is thought. Mauss's intervention in this article can be read as a questioning of the foundational assumptions of German Protestant biblical scholarship and its reactionary discourse in the name of internal critique.

### *An African 'Digression'*

Mauss's main argument, that 'similar conditions of life produce similar effects', is given explicit form at the end of his article, and constitutes a strong indictment of the prevalent hegemony of the colonial historiographic assumption that the history of a people can best be explained by their racial origins, especially in regard to the colonized. Here it seems necessary to undertake a brief digression involving Mauss's 1925 review of John Roscoe's ethnological study, under the auspices of the Mackie Expedition to Central Africa, of the 'tribes'<sup>2</sup> of the Uganda protectorate.<sup>3</sup> In this study, he was faced with the problem – often recurring (cf. Mamdani 1976: 33) – of

how to explain, as against the assumption that organized political/social power did not exist in Africa before colonialism, ‘the great progress which the people [of Uganda] have made in social and political life; they have advanced from the degraded barbarity of primitive nations to a stage approaching *very nearly* to that of civilized government’ (Roscoe 1924: 80, emphasis added). His way of resolving the difficulty was to argue for the ‘Hamitic influence’ of ‘an early immigration of a superior people ... [who] brought in a higher grade of social customs’ (ibid.). This invokes what has been called the ‘Hamitic hypothesis’, critically discussed some time ago by Edith Sanders (1969; see also Mamdani 2001: 79–87). It did not just help to determine a relation in which Africa’s ruling tribes were superior and hence Hamitic and the continent’s ‘aborigines’ were inferior and hence ‘Negroes and/or boskopoid’ (Davidson 1959: 9–12). It also bore on the relation between colonizer and colonized, as in the Reverend Roscoe’s view of the latter as ‘very nearly’ but not quite civilized – perhaps cursed and not blessed, if we are attentive to textual contamination.<sup>4</sup> According to Sanders (1969: 521), the word Ham first occurs in the Bible in Genesis, Chapter 5, in which there is an enumeration of the sons of Noah, identified as Shem, Ham and Japheth. In a repetitious narrative that is characteristic of Genesis, Chapter 6 also names the sons of Noah in the same order, as do Chapters 7 and 10; but Chapter 9 adds that Ham was the father of Canaan, from which proceeds the story of the curse of Ham.<sup>5</sup>

Mauss, in reviewing Roscoe, remains sceptical about this idea, advanced by the latter, and brings the reader’s attention back to the notion of ‘composite societies’ – societies that are a mixture of pastoral and agricultural people – and to be found not just in Africa but also elsewhere (Mauss [1925b] 1968, vol. 2: 551–53). On the face of it, Mauss’s thesis seems fairly incontrovertible. But it is necessary to note that his intervention was squarely at odds with the tendency in colonial – and even later revisionist – historiography to explain the highly centralized states of precolonial sub-Saharan Africa as the result of Hamitic and/or Nilo-Hamitic or Nilotic and/or Bantu influences, the last two of which are important in the revisionist scholarly work done in the aftermath of territorial decolonization.

This is an unsettling point for any assumption that thinking through race as a prism for history – a ‘historiosophy’ (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991: 55) – belongs to the past. Moreover, an account of the people of North Africa that is similar to Mauss’s approach can be found in a work written long ago, Ibn-Khaldun’s *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*. Mention of a text considered marginal to Western canonical historiography is not just in faithfulness to Mauss’s own strategy of digging up obscure references. It is also a way into complex questions concerning power and knowledge while trying to bypass discussion in terms of a seductive but unproductive framework of the good/bad historian or anthropologist. In

sum, then, Mauss's intervention in his essay on the Legend of Abraham can be read as an enquiry into the category of 'composite societies' that aims to rebut the widely accepted status of the 'Hamitic hypothesis' in the human and social sciences.

### *Europe and the 'Semitic Question'*

What impact was the race-thinking typified by this hypothesis set to have on Europe and the 'Semitic question'? The incisive analysis in Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* tried to address precisely this issue. Her decisive move was to look to the wider history of Europe's global conquest and expansion to understand the trajectory of 'the humanly incomprehensible mixture [of the horrible and the ridiculous] that is the hallmark of our century' (Arendt 1973: 172). The two institutions central to German power as it expanded through Europe were scientific racism and scientific bureaucracy (ibid.: 185–221). In a way, however, the point that these institutions were nurtured in the colonies begs the question of the relation between the three biblical brothers, Japheth, Shem and Ham.

As Arendt reports (1973: 172), Arthur de Gobineau had claimed in a book of 1853, *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, that 'the fall of civilizations is due to a degeneration of race and the decay of race is due to a mixture of blood'. In the book's hierarchy of races, only the Aryans, begotten from Japheth, had retained their purity, in contrast both with the Semites, begotten from Shem but polluted by the mulatto Hamites, and with the Hamites themselves, begotten from Ham but mongrelized by the inferior blacks.

It was in this intellectual milieu that, as Arendt also reports (1973: 174), Ernest Renan canonized the Aryan-Semite distinction in *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques* (1855, new editions 1858, 1863, 1878).<sup>6</sup> In another work, *Histoire des origines du Christianisme* (1863–1881, tr. 1890), he maintained that 'Christianity has gradually come to be stripped, with time, of all which it holds by its origin, so much so that the theory of those who consider it the Aryan religion par excellence is true from many points of view' (Renan 1890, vol. 7: 213). Here, he was trying to deal with a recurring theological problem for Christianity, of how to posit 'a rupture with Judaism' (ibid.), when he believed that Christ was born among a people who lived 'beyond the confines of history' (ibid., vol. 1: 45).<sup>7</sup> His solution was to argue for the purity of Jesus of Nazareth, as against the 'pharisaic spirit which reigned at Jerusalem' (ibid.: 22), and to draw a geographical distinction between Jerusalem and Galilee, the first surrounded by a region that was perhaps 'the gloomiest country in the world', the second with a 'charming and idyllic character' (ibid.: 65). It was the 'incomparable man' of Galilee to whom would be disclosed the 'true

poetry' of the Bible, which 'escaped the doctors of Jerusalem' (ibid.: 56), and which led, as already noted, to the 'Aryan religion par excellence'.<sup>8</sup>

Renan's claim was not about a simplistic superiority of the Aryans, whom he had identified as a race pure from any foreign 'penetration' (1890, vol. 3: 69).<sup>9</sup> It was about that of Christianity over Judaism, since the latter 'has only been the wild-stock upon which the Aryan race has produced its flower', and this is how 'Christianity, so notoriously Jewish in origin, has been able to become the national religion of the European races, which have sacrificed to it their ancient mythology' (ibid., vol. 7: 213). 'We Indo-Europeans', he claimed, 'have overcome our race through our religion; hence, we are nations.'<sup>10</sup> But, he asked, have the Jews living among us followed suit? This is an issue at stake in his essay, 'Judaism: Race or Religion?' (Renan 1943), and, in an echo of this essay's title, it is an issue Mauss's biographer highlights in commenting that Renan wondered, concerning Judaism, 'religion or race?' (Fournier 2006: 40).

## Conclusion

What, in the 'Legend of Abraham', was Mauss's approach to Renan's thesis? The essay comes with references to Renan's 'boors' and 'fanciful pages'. Yet it is without a detailed engagement with his work.<sup>11</sup> So is there nothing else to say? Let us try to follow the vertiginous movement of Mauss's text and conclude with one final remark.

His essay makes central the issue of proper names, and his text's own use of these accordingly requires careful attention. One of his most important references is introduced in relation to the prohibition of boiling a lamb in its mother's milk, and is to a commentary on Maimonides by Salomon Munk. Munk, who succeeded Renan in the Chair of Semitic Languages at the Collège de France in 1864, had published *Mélanges de philosophie juive et arabe* in 1859. In Alfred Ivry's excellent summarization of the work:

[it] bears witness in its totality, to the range and significance of Jewish philosophy vis-à-vis both Christian and Muslim cultures. Whether it was Philo in late antiquity or Ibn Gabirol in the Middle Ages, Jewish thinkers are seen as seminal to the thought of many Christian writers, just as the corpus of Islamic philosophy is regarded as having been preserved largely by Jews. Jewish philosophy is integral, in this view, to Western civilization, the Jews being contributors and custodians of much the West holds dear. (Ivry 2000: 125–26)

Munk was active in the movement for Jewish Studies (*Wissenschaft des Judentum*). A key contribution he made to this was to establish that it was in fact the Jewish medieval poet, Salomon ibn Gabirol of Malaga, who was the 'Arab philosopher' whose treatise, in its Latin translation as *Fons Vitae*,

was foundational to Thomas of Aquino, Albert the Great and other figures in Christian theology (Munk 1881: 21; Adorisio 2013: 204).<sup>12</sup> Munk's writings on ibn Gabirol helped to open up, at the turn of the twentieth century, what Chiara Adorisio (2013: 200n13) has called 'the path for the study' of the reciprocal influences of Jewish, Islamic and Christian thought in the Middle Ages, involving 'the idea of a philosophy of religion written in three languages: Hebrew, Arabic, and Latin'. This in a way involves the 'contamination' of the one by the other, or, in Mauss's terms, 'the absolute permeability of ancient societies', with their 'countless interpenetrations' (Mauss [1939] 1968, vol. 2: 571–72; cf. Fournier 2006: 329).

In coming to some conclusions on Mauss's essay, attention should be paid to its title, 'Critique interne de la "Légende d'Abraham"'. Since *critique interne* can simultaneously denote an internal critic/criticism, it raises the question of the 'who' and the 'what'. Without necessarily following the Heideggerian trajectory of this difference, we would like to mark the irreducibility of the one to the other. Importantly, *critique* is a derivative of the Greek *κρίτικός*, formed from the verb *κρίνω*, a key meaning of which is to 'judge'. Perhaps this essay is a judgement, and let us recall another piece of writing with a similar title, Kafka's *Das Urteil* (The Judgement), first published in 1913 and treating, in just as oblique a manner as the 'Legend of Abraham', the law of the father. If Kafka is the suicidal writer par excellence, did not Mauss also reflect on suicide?<sup>13</sup> In a patient reading, Kafka's maddening meditation on remembering and forgetfulness needs to be taken together with Mauss's essay and its strange vertiginous reckoning with the question of return. In any case, the last word belongs to Mauss. The work of ethnography should be done 'without presupposing that the people under observation are ignorant of the principle of contradiction'; a 'really' primitive religion is 'nowhere to be found ... all peoples living today are equally old. Therefore, do not look for the primitive' (Mauss 2007: 160–61).

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## Notes

1. Taubes' work, *From Cult to Culture*, offers a formidable analysis of the issue between Judaism and Christianity. But it should be read along with his other masterpiece, *The Political Theology of Paul*, in which he sets out to demonstrate that Franz Rosenzweig, Hans Joachim Schoeps and Martin Buber were – to echo the opening line of Mauss's essay – 'prisoners' of the Protestant vocabulary (Taubes 2004: 50).
2. On this term, see Mamdani 1976: 2–3.
3. For a succinct history of the Uganda protectorate, see Mamdani 1983: 6.
4. For further background, see Bernal's *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (1987: 240–46), on historically ambivalent views of the status of ancient Egypt. These involved its double devaluation, both by considering it African although not Negroid and/or boskopoid and by positing a rupture between it and the alleged cradle of modern Europe, ancient Greece. Another link is with what Derrida discussed, in *Of Grammatology*, as seventeenth-century Europe's 'theological prejudice', which operated as if 'God wrote a primordial or natural script: Hebrew or Greek' (Spivak 1999: 280), made the centre of logos the Judaeo-Christian God, and was influential to the point that even 'our century is not free from it' (Derrida 1998: 80). A whole reading of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* can be inserted here.
5. Importantly, she points out that 'the Bible makes no mention of racial differences among the ancestors of mankind. It is much later that an idea of race appears with reference to the sons of Noah; it concerns the descendants of Ham' (Sanders 1969: 521).
6. Arendt cautions the reader: 'As for the philologists of the early nineteenth century, whose concept of "Aryanism" has seduced almost every student of racism to count them among the propagandists or even inventors of race-thinking, they are as innocent as innocent can be. When they overstepped the limits of pure research it was because they wanted to include in the same cultural brotherhood as many nations as possible. In the words of Ernest Seillière [1903, vol. 1: xxxv], "There was a kind of intoxication: modern civilization believed it had recovered its pedigree ... and an organism was born which embraced in one and the same fraternity all nations whose language showed some affinity with Sanskrit". In other words, these men were still in the humanistic tradition of the eighteenth century and shared its enthusiasm about strange people and exotic cultures' (Arendt 1973: 160n6). Going on from this, it can also be argued that 'theoretical racism is in no sense the absolute antithesis of humanism' (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991: 63) and that the doctrine that

'makes man as a species the origin and end of declared and established rights' (ibid.) needs to be persistently unsettled in light of the contamination of the human by – this confused category of – the animal(s), 'humanity and animality' (ibid.: 57). We are borrowing here from Joseph Massad's 'Forget Semitism!' (2013); Semitism has always been anti-Semitism in that it was created as a historical ruse by a class of intellectuals, scholars and philologists in order to oppose it to its superior other, the Aryan. For Massad, in line with Said, this knowledge production created its own object of inquiry – the Semite before Semitism – an object that it tried to present as having a history distinct from the Aryan in order to consolidate anti-Semitism and colonial Orientalism. This is the context in which the term 'anti-Semitism' was popularized by Wilhelm Marr, who in 1879 published a pamphlet entitled *The Victory of Judaism over Germanism*, and who insisted that the differentiation between Jews and Aryans was strictly racial and not religious (Weber 2013: 64).

7. He maintained that, since Galilee had mixed inhabitants, it would be 'impossible to raise any question of race here or to try to discover what blood flowed in the veins of him [Jesus] who has most of any contributed to efface the distinctions of blood in humanity' (Renan 1890, vol. 1: 51).
8. It is important to note that even though both Gobineau and Renan were trying to give the cartography of the Judaeo-Christian myth the status of a geopolitical history in their own different ways, they had an acute awareness that this project requires a perfectibility of its own. Although, for Arendt (1973: 174), Gobineau's '*filis de roi*' and Renan's 'civilization' operate as 'the great superior force which destroys local originalities as well as original race differences', she fails to bring to the fore the occultation at work in race-thinking. This seems most clearly evident when, in explaining the evolution of race-thinking in Germany, she argues: 'Out of the failure to raise the people to nationhood, out of the lack of common historical memories and the apparent popular apathy to common destinies in the future, a naturalistic appeal was born which addressed itself to tribal instincts as a possible substitute for what the whole world had seen to be the glorious power of French nationhood' (ibid.: 166). This description of race-thinking as an atavism and/or throwback to something 'naturalistic' – Arendt's word – and/or tribal as opposed to the project of nation-building remains problematic for it fails to bring to light the indissociable 'social relations' (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991: 38) that contaminate racism and nationalism. Thus, 'what theoretical racism calls "race" or "culture" is ... a continued origin of the nation, a concentrate of the qualities which belong to the nationals "as their own"; it is in the "race of its children" that the nation could contemplate its own identity in the pure state', which, as Balibar continues, does not necessarily imply that 'racism is an inevitable consequence of nationalism, nor, *a fortiori* that without the existence of an overt or latent racism, nationalism would itself be historically impossible' (ibid.: 59). It should be noted, however, that Arendt's argument is more specific in nature, in its concern with racism in Europe up until the end of the Second World War, whereas Balibar (ibid.: 54) is trying to deal with the general form of the 'contradiction between universality and particularism' that both nationalism and racism are caught up in, and so his argument can be made to resonate well with that of Arendt.

9. In his travels across Asia Minor, he had even found in the mount of Orontes a 'well-defined line of demarcation' (Renan 1890, vol. 3: 66) that could be used to differentiate not only nature, fertile/desert, but also races, Aryan/Semite.
10. We are indebted here to Talal Asad (2011: 37): 'It is by now well known that the modern concept of religion as an object of systematic study is relatively recent. The term *religio* is of course quite old, but it did not have the sense that emerged in early modern times. Roughly from the seventeenth century on the idea gradually crystallized among European thinkers that in every society people believed in supernatural beings, told stories about the origin of the world and about what happens to the soul after death; that in every society people instituted rituals of worship and deferred to experts in these matters; and that therefore religion was not something only Christians had'. His analysis needs to be kept in mind when reading: 'In most human societies, the fieldworker will be in the presence of *homo religiosus*, religious man, for this is how members of societies outside the European world define themselves: they themselves are searchers on themselves. In our own society, where religion has become just one category among others, *homo religiosus* has given way, not to *homo faber*, but to *homo economicus*' (Mauss 2007: 159). What is questionable for Asad (2011: 38) is the attempt of some theorists to make 'a particular language-game the basis of a *universal* conception of religion as "faith"'.  
11. According to Edward Said (1979: 105), Islam had a meaning for Orientalism that, if we looked for its most succinct formulation, could be found in Renan's first treatise: to be best understood, Islam had to be reduced to 'tent and tribe'. In Mauss's essay, there are two occurrences of the word 'tent'. The first is in reference to Abraham, who legendarily set up his tent close to Bethel and Mamre, and Mauss can already be read as connecting 'tent' and the figure whose name appears in the three scriptural traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Mauss indicts the three traditions together in his final use of the term, when he insists, implicitly against Renan, that 'the Semites, even those of the tent, have always been civilized'.
12. But also see Adorasio's article, 'The Debate between Salomon Munk and Heinrich Ritter' (2012). Munk's introduction to *Mélanges* defended the importance of Jewish thought for Christian and Islamic culture in a clear opposition to Ritter's book, *Geschichte der Philosophie (History of Philosophy)*, published in twelve volumes between 1829 and 1835. But Munk had been engaged, well before this, in refuting Ritter's thesis that 'throughout the course of history, the Jews had not produced a single original philosopher', and that it was therefore 'superfluous to treat Jewish philosophy in his book' (Adorasio 2012: 175). In her analysis, Ritter's book 'reflected a Hegelian approach to Judaism', which prompted Munk to publish, in 1837, two reviews of its French translation, and these set 'a critique of German speculative philosophy, in particular Hegel's philosophy, whose method, for Munk, amounted to a kind of modern theology' (Adorasio 2012: 175). Munk wrote the *Mélanges* despite the blindness that had overcome him. It revolves around a Latinized Arabic proper name, Avicebron, shuttering another proper name, Salomon ibn-Gabirol, which was also the proper name of Munk himself. The *Mélanges*, with its doubling of the Jew and the Arab, is a blind writing that demands a blind reading.

13. On Mauss's contributions to Durkheim's study of suicide, see Mauss (1998: 31) and Fournier (2006: 53–55). On his own approach to the issue, see Mauss and Fauconnet ([1901] 1968, vol. 3: 150), Mauss ([1925c] 1968, vol. 3: 52–57) and Fournier (2006: 218, 225), who also quotes Mauss as saying in 1944: 'I still have my revolver ... If [the Germans] come, I'll know what to do' (ibid.: 347).