

# POLITICAL CONCEPTS: A CRITICAL LEXICON

## Parasite

Anders M. Gullestad

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From holy to base and comic, and then to degenerate and utterly worthless, fit for nothing but extinction: few examples show the extreme flexibility, adaptability and changing fortunes of concepts as well as that of the *parasite*. What's more, this strange historical trajectory has turned the parasite into a key term for understanding the exclusionary mechanisms at the heart of modern Western societies, coming to function as a name for a class of beings not entitled to the same basic rights as others. While such mechanisms have historically found their clearest expression in totalitarian regimes, there is no doubt that milder versions are at work in even the most advanced liberal democracies, helping create and secure their borders through separating inside from outside, as well as marking that which is spatially located inside the borders, but which is thought not to properly belong. This article will argue that reconceptualising the parasite is a necessary step if one wants to disrupt and move beyond the workings of such a logic of exclusion and dehumanization.

Today, the word parasite tends to bring to mind nasty little creatures such as lice or tapeworms, living off (and in) others, all the while giving nothing in return. In some cases the outcome of this unequal relationship might only be a minor loss of energy to the host, in others it will be its death, devoured by its sponging guest.<sup>1</sup> No matter which of the two is the case, though, as long as a relationship is parasitic – as opposed to mutualistic or commensalistic – it implies a fundamental unfairness and inequality.

The word might also bring to mind humans acting in a similar manner, trying to get more out of society than they give back. Candidates for this role are *legio*, be they greedy capitalists (according to those on the political left) or lazy good-for-nothings (according to those on the right). Two examples will suffice. First a quote from Irish socialist James Connolly, later to be executed for his role in the Easter Rising of 1916. In 1899, arguing for independence from the British, he touches upon the topic of what exactly those owning the means of production can be said to contribute to society:

The capitalist, I say, is a parasite on industry; as useless in the present stage of our industrial development as any other parasite in the animal or vegetable world is to the life of the animal or vegetable upon which it feeds. The working class is the victim of this parasite – this human leech, and it is the duty and interest of the working class to use every means in its power to oust this parasite class from the position which enables it to thus prey upon the vitals of labour.<sup>2</sup>

For our second example, let us have a look at a talk given by Ayn Rand on February 9, 1961. In addition to condemning those trying to reform society in such a way as to help the poor, she here had the following to say about the worth (or rather lack thereof) of people receiving welfare:

these very benefits indicate, delimit and define what kind of men can be of value to one another and in what kind of society: only rational, productive, independent men in a rational, productive, free society. Parasites, moochers, looters, brutes and thugs can be of no value to a human being – nor can he gain any benefit from living in a society geared to *their* needs, demands and protection, a society that treats him as a sacrificial animal and penalizes him for his virtues in order to reward *them* for their vices, which means: a society based on the ethics of altruism. No society can be of value to man's life if the price is the surrender of his right to his life.<sup>3</sup>

From this we might tentatively conclude that about the only thing the two positions have in common is the view that the parasite – no matter if in animal or human shape – is a useless creature whose only contribution is of a negative kind, draining the health of its host organism. The fact that the opposite poles of the political spectrum are here in complete agreement, says something about how common this extremely low opinion is. The question therefore arises: why is this so?

### The invention of the biological parasite

To answer this, we might begin by inquiring into what exactly it is Connolly and Rand are doing when labelling their enemies in this manner. The obvious answer is that they use the concept in a metaphorical sense, fusing different entities together through attributing traits belonging to one of them to the other. Since in this case the transfer or *metaphora* (“carrying over”) of traits almost always goes one way, and one way only – *from* the parasites found in nature and *to* those people accused of being (like) them – we have a tendency of thinking of the former as “natural” or “original”, whereas the latter is considered as a later supplement. That this is so is for example attested to by the following part of the definition of a (social) parasite from the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “a person whose behaviour resembles that of a plant or animal parasite.”<sup>4</sup> Or to put it differently: for the attribution of such traits to humans to make sense, we take for granted that there must originally have been a nonhuman parasite.

Contrary to this very common view, it is important to note that the word originally *solely* referred to social parasites. If we look at the etymology, the word itself is derived from the Greek *parasitos*, consisting of *para* (besides) and *sitos* (the grain), *i.e.* besides the grain or the food. Even from the start it was thus connected to eating and nourishment: having its origin in Greek religious practices of the fifth century B.C. at the latest, the name parasite initially designated temple assistants who, according to W. Geoffrey Arnott, “received free food and meals in return for services like that of the selection of the sacred grain for use in particular festivals”<sup>5</sup> – most famously the Heracleia, the annual celebration of Heracles at Kynosarges, near Athens.<sup>6</sup> As he argues, even though one can find earlier examples of characters in drama exhibiting traits which would come to be associated with the term, it was only around ca. 360—350 B.C. – when the comedy writer Alexis took it as the title of his play *Parasitos* – that parasite took on its secondary meaning as one who frequents the tables of the rich, earning his dinner through stories told, flattery and the willingness to perform all sorts of services for his patron.

Arnott hypothesises that in Alexis’s play, the term was simply used as a comic moniker for one of the characters, but that the name stuck: “[W]e may guess that what began as a colourful nickname for one stage parasite so impressed the audience by its aptness that they began to use it themselves as the *mot juste* for the type as a whole.”<sup>7</sup> No matter if this is correct or not, the consequences are clear: over time the parasite ended up as a more or less interchangeable rival to the earlier comedic stock character of the *kolax* (the flatterer) as a name for those characters in Greek and Latin comedy looking for a free lunch, be it in a literal or metaphorical sense.<sup>8</sup> While most often functioning as types, rather than individualized characters, frequently made to serve as butts of jokes and as moral exempla of unethical behaviour to be avoided, the parasites of classical comedy bear little resemblance to what the term would later come to signify. In fact, they are not always seen in a negative light, but are sometimes presented as intelligent opportunists who excel at taking advantage of the stupidity of others (cf. Gnatho in Terence’s *Eunuchus*). At other times they even come to play leading roles, as in the case of the title character of Terence’s *Phormio*, a charming rascal who easily outwits his opponents, in the end acquiring the coveted prize he is after: a dinner invitation.

It is therefore not the sponging human, but the biological parasite and the scientific field to which it is related which are the more recent additions: it is not the louse, but man who was the original parasite. If we were to highlight some of the stages through which the set of parasitic entities was thus to be drastically expanded, according to the *OED*, the first known usage of the adjective “parasitical” in English to indicate sponging among nonhumans, is from 1646: in his attack on the various errors of his age in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, Sir Thomas Browne argues that – contrary to common belief – mistletoe does not grow upon trees as a result of

seeds dropped by birds. In passing, he notes that

therefore also where ever it [mistletoe] groweth, it is of constant shape, and maintains a regular figure; like other supercrefences, and such as living upon the stock of others, are termed parasitical Plants, as Polypody, Moss, the smaller Capillaries, and many more: So that several regions produce several Mistletoes; *India* one, *America* another, according to the law and rule of their degenerations.<sup>9</sup>

Again according to the *OED*, as a noun, “parasite” was first used in the current scientific sense in Ephraim Chambers’ *Cyclopædia* (1728), when he – under the heading “PARASITES, or PARASITAICAL [sic] Plants” – defined the subject as “in Botany, a Kind of diminutive Plants, growing on Trees, and so called from their Manner of living and feeding, which is altogether on others.”<sup>10</sup>

Here it must be noted that this was only the second meaning given to the term by Chambers, the first and most important dealing with the aforementioned social origins of the concept:

PARASITE, PARASITUS, among the *Greeks*, was originally a very reputable Title; the *Parafites* being a King of Priests, or at least Ministers of the Gods [...]. They took care of the *sacred Corn*, or the Corn destined for Service of the Temples and the Gods, viz. Sacrifices, Feasts, &c. They had even the Intendance over Sacrifices, and took care they were duly performed. At *Athens* there was a Kind of College of twelve *Parafites*; each people of *Attica* furnishing one; who was always chosen out of the best Families. *Polybius* adds, that *Parafite* was also an honourable Name among the antient *Gauls*; and was given to their Poets.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, to Chambers, there are only two kinds of parasites: men and plants, the former being by far the most important.<sup>12</sup> The idea that animals and insects could be labelled and understood thus is even more recent. The first example discussing insect parasites noted by the *OED*, is the fourth volume of William Kirby and William Spence’s *An Introduction to Entomology*, published in 1826. While the two authors had also applied the term in the earlier volumes, published from 1815 and onwards, and while I have come across a reference from as early as 1769 describing cuckoos as “animal parasites”,<sup>13</sup> it seems this new meaning probably only started coming into common usage in English around the late 1820s and the 1830s. It is thus a modern invention. This is also the case for what we tend to take for granted as the natural companion of the concept of the parasite – that of the *host*, which is even newer: in an explanatory footnote after the first instance of the word in his translation of Friedrich Küchenmeister’s influential *On Animal and Vegetable Parasites of the Human Body* (1857), Edwin Lankester notes that “‘Host’ is a literal translation of the German ‘Wirth,’ and although not perhaps previously used in the above sense in the English language, I have adopted it to prevent a somewhat tedious circumlocution.”<sup>14</sup>

When it comes to the creation of the scientific field of parasitology itself, it is not easy giving an exact date. Even so, there seems to be a general agreement that, important predecessors notwithstanding, it can be said to properly commence sometime during the period between 1840 and 1870. There are several reasons for this: first, for the study of parasites to become scientific, it was dependent upon the invention of the microscope. As Jonathan Z. Smith puts it:

awareness of parasitism’s ubiquity had to await the late seventeenth-century development of the microscope. This resulted in a decisive shift of intellectual interest to the scientific, philosophical, and literary topos of the intricately small. Even after this point, despite the enormous increase in data, theoretical issues with respect both to taxonomy and “spontaneous generation” had to be settled before the discipline of parasitology could emerge.<sup>15</sup>

The question of “spontaneous generation” here referred to, concerns the origins of such miniscule creatures as finally made visible after Anton van Leeuwenhoek’s 1673 invention of an improved microscope, which, as Edward S. Dunster puts it in his “The History of the Doctrine of Spontaneous Generation” (1876),

“brought into view a new outlying territory which swarmed with animal life in numbers and kind before unsuspected.”<sup>16</sup> The question of where these “animalcules” – as they were then known – came from and how they lived, was one that puzzled the scientists of van Leeuwenhoek’s day. Building on the tradition stretching back at least to Aristotle, the commonly accepted answer was that such creatures were not the offspring of any preceding animals. Rather, they were thought to have been spontaneously generated out of different nonliving elements, or, as Aristotle describes it in *Historia Animalium*:

some [animals] come into being from animals whose natural form is of the same kind as their own; others spontaneously and not from animals of the same kind as themselves: and the latter are subdivided into (a) those which arise out of putrefying earth and plants, which is the case with many of the Insects; and (b) those which arise inside animals themselves out of the residues in their parts.<sup>17</sup>

Although the Italian naturalist Francesco Redi launched an attack on the validity of this view, known as the theory of *abiogenesis*, as early as in 1668 – through experiments, he showed the presence of maggots in putrefying meat to be caused by eggs from blow-flies, rather than by spontaneous generation – his work and that of others following in his footsteps only managed to reduce the area to which the theory was applied, rather than once and for all disprove it. In the words of John Call Dalton:

spontaneous generation lost its rank as a great natural division of the reproductive function; and came to be regarded as an exceptional phenomenon, confined to a very few species whose existence could not be accounted for in the ordinary way. Its territory was narrowed exactly in proportion as the knowledge of natural history advanced; and it became reduced almost exclusively to the class of animals known as *entozoa* or internal parasites.<sup>18</sup>

In regards to such entozoa, the adherents of spontaneous generation considered them as caused by a sick body, rather than as something which could make the body sick in the first place. This was not finally disproven before the mid-nineteenth century, in part due to the work of such scientists as the Danish zoologist Japetus Steenstrup in 1842 and Friedrich Küchenmeister in the 1850s.<sup>19</sup> From this point on, parasites could no longer be viewed as symptoms. On the contrary, scientists had to accept the fact that these were creatures that could be studied in their own right, and from this the field of parasitology proper can finally come into being.

The conclusion this brief historical outline is meant to lead to is the following: until the concept of the parasite was adopted by the natural sciences in regards first to plants, and later to animals and insects, *no other parasites than men could properly be said to exist*. This is of course not because the louse or the mistletoe were not there before man (which they most certainly were), or that people were not aware of such creatures long before they were classified as parasites by the natural sciences.<sup>20</sup> Rather, the point is simply that they were not covered by the term before scientists started applying it as a name for those non-human creatures that live at the expense of other organisms: it is then, and only then, that first plants, and later insects and animals properly become parasites, just as people can not really be said to have become hosts to these intruders until this term was taken up in the 1850s.

This has far-reaching consequences, fundamentally complicating the supposed objectivity of parasitology as a natural science. As Han-liang Chang argues with regard to the (im)possibility of a clear-cut distinction between literary and biological discourse in “Notes Towards a Semiotics of Parasitism” (2003):

From this fictitious distinction one may develop accordingly a literary semiotics and a biological semiotics, as if the latter could be immuned from the containment of language. This, of course, is to miss the encroachment of rhetoric on biology and the fact that even parasitology as a positive science is encoded in language in the first place.<sup>21</sup>

No matter how much the natural sciences lay claim to a direct access to phenomena, this access will always



have to be articulated in a language defined by cultural norms and traditions. In this regard the scientific language of parasitology is particularly interesting, because it is so suffused with remnants of the social origins of its object of study, or, as Michel Serres puts it in his *The Parasite* (1980):

The basic vocabulary of this science comes from such ancient and common customs and habits that the earliest monuments of our culture tell of them, and we still see them, at least in part: hospitality, conviviality, table manners, hostelry, general relations with strangers. Thus the vocabulary is imported to this pure science and bears several traces of anthropomorphism.<sup>22</sup>

### **Parasites and the theory of degeneration**

To return to the question of the parasite metaphor, we are now in a position to see that when we label people as such today, it does not just involve one, but two transfers of meaning. When the concept was first applied to plants and animals, attributes from human society related to hospitality were transposed to the animal kingdom, causing us to understand the relationship between parasite and host in ethical terms foreign to nature. As this first transfer has more or less been totally forgotten, we are here dealing with a “dead metaphor”, where something metaphorical has come to be taken as literally true.

Then, with the second transfer, these attributes came to be brought back to man in a modified form, thus reshaping the concept in a way which was to have unforeseen and far-reaching consequences of a truly detrimental kind. As productive and important as the scientific field of parasitology has proven to be, there is no doubt that it played an unfortunate part in this process, especially in its early stages. A lecture by British zoologist E. Ray Lankester (the son of Küchenmeister’s translator) from 1879, later to be printed under the title “Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism”, can begin to indicate why this is so. Here, we see a convergence between (social) Darwinism and the different theories of degeneration in vogue in Europe after the publication of Bénédict Augustin Morel’s *Treatise on the Physical, Intellectual and Moral Degeneration of the Human Race* (1857). Construing social deviance as a question of heredity, as something which is passed on from generation to generation, what Morel’s theory offered was a new and powerful vocabulary for addressing the existence of unwanted social elements deemed harmful to the common good, as well as feared to be impossible to properly integrate or educate. Due to anxieties resulting from the steady increase of the urban poor, as well as all the societal problems that came with it, this was a question which had increasingly been haunting Western nineteenth century societies, coinciding with an increasing importance of science – and especially of biology and medicine – as conceptual and rhetorical tools for discussing social questions. More specifically, to a larger and larger degree society itself came to be conceived in terms borrowed from the natural sciences, especially in regards to its supposedly organic character.<sup>23</sup>

This background goes a long way towards explaining why the theory of degeneration came to occupy such a central position, especially when we take into account how it received scientific credibility through aligning itself with evolutionary thought – whether in Darwinian or Lamarckian shape.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the concept of degeneration proved so inclusive and malleable that instead of ending up as a name for one specific problem among many, it was capable of encompassing almost all of society’s fears. As Daniel Pick argues in *Faces of Degeneration* (1989), it thus became “the condition of conditions, the ultimate signifier of pathology”<sup>25</sup>:

crucially, there was no one stable referent to which degeneration applied; instead a fantastic kaleidoscope of concerns and objects through the second half of the [nineteenth] century, from cretinism to alcoholism to syphilis, from peasantry to urban working class, bourgeoisie to aristocracy, madness to theft, individual to crowd, anarchism to feminism, population decline to population increase.<sup>26</sup>

Even though the theory – or, to be more precise: the various, sometimes incompatible or contradictory theories which Morel’s work helped inspire – was by no means unanimously accepted, the notion of degeneration still managed to gain a secure foothold in the Western imagination, where it resided at least until the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup> Pick explains this longevity as resulting from how the

theory became part of doxa:

Degeneration was certainly called up by various sciences for purposes of legitimation; but it was more than simply an instrument of those sciences; it could not easily be put back or abandoned even in the face of specific, powerful technical critiques, precisely because it remained for so many commentators an assumed common sense, an inevitable home truth.<sup>28</sup>

As one of the most important British advocates of degeneration<sup>29</sup>, Lankester's work shows us in an explicit manner how the diffuse relationship between the human and the nonhuman parasite allowed the concept to function as a bridge between nature and social policy. As such, it exemplifies how easily the negative connotations belonging to the new scientific concept of the animal parasite in turn could become attached to humans perceived as unproductive or damaging to the health of the social body as a whole. Arguing that evolution can take three different forms – termed “balance,” “elaboration,” and “degeneration,” respectively – Lankester uses animal parasites as the foremost examples of the latter category, representing a swerve in the exact opposite direction from what he takes to be the ideal goal of evolution: a move towards ever increasing complexity.<sup>30</sup> The degenerate parasites, on the other hand, are content to become steadily less complex, often as a result of too easy an access to food:

Any new set of conditions occurring to an animal which render its food and safety very easily attained, seem to lead as a rule to Degeneration; just as an active healthy man sometimes degenerates when he becomes suddenly possessed of a fortune; or as Rome degenerated when possessed of the riches of the ancient world. The habit of parasitism clearly acts upon animal organisation in this way. Let the parasitic life once be secured, and away go legs, jaws, eyes, and ears; the active, highly gifted crab, insect, or annelid may become a mere sac, absorbing nourishment and laying eggs.<sup>31</sup>

Lankester then goes on to present humanity as ruled by the same general laws, where the potential of degeneration is always present, in individuals as well as in groups of people and entire societies:

In accordance with a tacit assumption of universal progress – an unreasoning optimism – we are accustomed to regard ourselves as necessarily progressing, as necessarily having arrived at a higher and more elaborated condition than that which our ancestors reached, and as destined to progress still further. On the other hand, it is well to remember that we are subject to the general laws of evolution, and are as likely to degenerate as to progress.<sup>32</sup>

Thus inscribing parasitism into a wider theory informed by the convergence of evolution and degeneration, Lankester and those of his contemporaries arguing along the same lines,<sup>33</sup> thereby end up giving scientific backing and legitimacy to a new, reshaped conception of the human parasite.<sup>34</sup> In the process whoever so judged was marked as little or no better than what was considered the lowest and most useless of all animals, or as Carl Zimmer puts it: “People had been referred to as parasites before the late 1800s, but Lankester and other scientists gave the metaphor a precision, a transparency, that it had never had before.”<sup>35</sup> More precisely, these scientists helped turn what had until then, when applied in a derogatory manner, primarily functioned as a rhetorical means of accusing individuals of being fawning and sycophantic into a very effective means of labelling entire groups of people as less than human.

## Reflections on the Jewish parasite

As we will see, this second metaphorical transfer exists in a vague borderland, where it is sometimes perceived as a figure of speech and sometimes as a description of reality. In other words, as a metaphor it is neither entirely “alive” nor “dead”, but is somewhere in between. In those instances where it comes the closest to being taken for literally true, this circular detour from man to animal and back to man can even be said to have led to the creation of a new being: a *homo parasitus*, the less than human man not entitled to the

same basic rights as others. Similar to the *homo sacer* in Giorgio Agamben's analysis, this is a creature that can be killed with impunity.<sup>36</sup>

To describe this *homo parasitus*, it is helpful to begin by looking at what is probably the most effective and well-orchestrated application ever of the term "parasite" to a group of people, playing an important part in legitimizing the Nazi's *Endlösung*.<sup>37</sup> A 1944 manual issued by the "nationalsozialistischer Führungsstab der Wehrmacht", for example, tells us that

The Jew wants us to be forced into a life of slavery so as to live among us as a parasite who can suck us dry. Our people's sound way of life opposes the parasitic Jewish existence. Who can believe it possible [...] to reform or convert a parasite (a louse for example)? Who can believe in a compromise with the parasite? We are left with one choice only, either to be devoured by the parasite or to exterminate it. The Jew must be exterminated wherever we meet him! We do not commit a crime against life acting like this; on the contrary, we serve the law of life by fighting against all that is hostile to a sound existence. Our fight serves, indeed, the preservation of life.<sup>38</sup>

As Alex Bein argues in a thorough and important contribution to the topic – "The Jewish Parasite. Notes on the Semantics of the Jewish Problem, with special Reference to Germany" (1964) – this and similar contemporary statements can be said to stand as the crowning achievements of a long process, having its origin in the popular demonic images of Jews in the Middle Ages. As he sees it, an important step on the road leading up to the Nazi's extermination camps is the intermingling of German Romanticism's emphasis on the "organic" with insights and terms from natural science, which led to images such as that of the "Volkskörper" ("racial body") acquiring "in the course of time more and more the meaning of a genuine biological term."<sup>39</sup> Bein argues that the same process can be said to apply to different epithets used to describe Jews, including "canker" and "parasite" (the latter "very likely the most fatal word in this context"<sup>40</sup>): what was originally used and perceived as an analogy – as was the case when Johann Gottfried Herder, in 1784, likened Jews to parasitical plants<sup>41</sup> – over time ended up as "understood solely as a biological term derived from natural science."<sup>42</sup> Once this happens, and once the image of the parasitic (and therefore less than human) Jew has been widely circulated – as the propaganda machinery of the National Socialists duly ensured it was – the road to genocide lies open.

There is no question that Bein is correct in arguing that their historical past made the Jews an easy target, since the different connotations attached to the notion of the parasite end up freely intermingling with the connotations attached to other derogatory epithets, thus mutually enforcing each other.<sup>43</sup> Even so, it can be asked whether he does not end up partly ignoring the extreme usefulness of the concept in denigrating your opponents – no matter who they are:

The Jew, decried since the Middle Ages as a blood sucker and exploiter of his "host nation", then made to bear the added burden of the odium of capitalism, always and everywhere regarded as an alien and belonging, according to the race theory of the antisemites, to an inferior unproductive race – who else would fit the descriptive term "parasite" better? Indeed, the biological definition seems in this case so fitting that it might have been specially made to measure!<sup>44</sup>

While there might not be anybody else who would fit the term *better*, this does not mean that there are not others who has fitted it equally well through history, nor does it mean that Jews themselves have been immune from making similar accusations against others. A case in point is Theodor Herzl, whose biography Bein had written in 1934. "The Jewish Parasite" criticizes Victor Klemperer, author of *The Language of the Third Reich: A Philologist's Notebook*, for his stance in regards to Zionism:

Quite deviant, and not in keeping with the general trend of the book are Klemperer's derogative remarks on Zionism in which his assimilation complex as a baptised Jew makes him see nothing but the

“perverted romanticism” which he thinks is also responsible for National Socialism. In the third edition he even points to similarities of language between Herzl and – Hitler.<sup>45</sup>

Bein seems to find this comparison so preposterous that no further comments are needed, but the truth is that Herzl was indeed no stranger to name-calling, especially in regards to those Jews opposed to his political visions. Or as Jacques Kornberg puts it in *Theodor Herzl: From Assimilation to Zionism* (1993):

[T]here were many Jews who stubbornly resisted self-transformation through Zionism, and Herzl’s Jewish self-contempt was now concentrated exclusively on them. [...] He called anti-Zionist opponents “Jewish vermin,” employing the German word *Schädlinge*, which also means parasite, a common anti-Jewish epithet.<sup>46</sup>

This should be taken into account if one wants to understand the origins and evolution of the fundamental and still active opposition between Zionists and Haredim throughout Israel’s history. Because the latter are exempt from military service and do often not hold regular jobs, instead dedicating their lives to studying the Torah, they are commonly labelled parasites by the former. As Noah Efron puts it in *Real Jews: Secular Versus Ultra-Orthodox: The Struggle for Jewish Identity in Israel* (2003): “For most [Israelis], the image of the ultra-Orthodox parasite simply captures better than any other the perception that Haredim consume more than they produce, that they take more from the country than they give back.”<sup>47</sup>

Focusing too narrowly on being labelled parasites by others as the fate of Jews, Bein can therefore be said to ignore that in some instances, Jews have also played a role in shaping the concept into the deadly rhetorical weapon it would end up as. Especially interesting in this regard is how the National Socialist’s fight for “the preservation of life” not only included exterminating people, but also purging society of the different cultural products created by Jews and other entities equally “hostile to a sound existence”, i.e. getting rid of *entartete Kunst* (degenerate art). It is an ironic paradox that this project (and this is something Bein completely omits mentioning) can be seen as a direct continuation of what Max Nordau – social critic, Zionist leader and friend of Herzl’s – set out to do in his *Degeneration* (1892). Today largely forgotten, yet at the time widely read and translated, Nordau’s book is a venomous and moralistic attack on contemporary trends in art, literature and philosophy – among others targeting Baudelaire, Ibsen, Zola and Nietzsche, as well as their followers – which are seen as part of a wider degenerative process threatening civilization.

While not directly concerned with the parasite, as such, here – as part of a description of the “ideal man of decadentism” – we can find an example that throws further light on the process through which insights from the then new scientific field of parasitology were brought to bear on individuals or groups perceived as damaging to society:

We have him now, then, the ‘super-man’ (*surhomme*) of whom Baudelaire and his disciples dream, and whom they wish to resemble: physically ill and feeble; morally, an arrant scoundrel; intellectually, an unspeakable idiot [...] The dunderhead considers himself infinitely superior to other people, and his inconceivable stupidity only equals his inflated adoration of himself. He possesses an income of 50,000 francs and must also have it, for such a pitiable creature would not be in a position to draw one sou from society, or one grain of wheat from nature. A parasite of the lowest grade of atavism, a sort of human sacculus, he would be condemned, if he were poor, to die miserably of hunger in so far as society, in misdirected charity, did not assure him the necessities of life in an idiot asylum.<sup>48</sup>

Worth quoting is also the footnote inserted to explain the word “sacculus,” referring to the parasite *Sacculina carcini*, which, due to its mode of action in regards to its host, for a long time was singled out by naturalists – E. Ray Lankester included – as the lowliest of all low parasites:

The sacculus is a cirripedia which lives in the condition of a parasite in the intestinal canal of certain crustacea. It represents the deepest retrograde transformation of a living being primarily of a higher

organization. It has lost all its differentiated organs, and essentially only amounts to a vesicule (hence its name: little bag), which fills itself with juices from its host, absorbed by the parasite with the help of certain vessels, which it plunges into the intestinal walls of the latter. This atrophied creature has retained so few marks of an independent animal that it was looked upon for a long time as a diseased excrescence of its host's intestines.<sup>49</sup>

Given the old trope of the “greedy and usurious Jew”, it is a mean irony that the Latin term *sacculus* originally was used to refer to *money bags*, indicating how easy it would later be for the Nazis to adapt Nordau's arguments to their own ends. In fact, the anti-semite Alfred Rosenberg was later to connect *Sacculina carcini* explicitly to Jews in his bestseller *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* (1930), where he stated that the idea of the Jewish parasite

shall in the first instance not be taken as a moral judgement but as biological reality, exactly in the same way in which we speak of parasitic occurrences in the life of plants and animals. The sacculina pierces the rectum of the common crab, and gradually grows into it, it sucks away its vital forces; the same process occurs when the Jew invades society through the open wounds of the people, consuming their creative forces and hastening the doom of society.<sup>50</sup>

### Exterminating the parasite

In addition to *who* are seen as the degenerate parasites undermining society from within, one important difference between Nordau's stance and that of the Nazis should be mentioned: this in regards to how they propose to solve the problems perceived as threats to civilization. Although Nordau seems to hold hopes for the cure of those who are only moderately “infected” by the degenerate spirit of the age,<sup>51</sup> according to him, this will not be possible for everyone. Once past a certain point, nothing can bring the inflicted back to health: “Those degenerates, whose mental derangement is too deep-seated, must be abandoned to their inexorable fate. They are past cure or amelioration. They will rave for a season, and then perish. This book is obviously not written for them.”<sup>52</sup> For this reason, Nordau does not argue for the need to *actively* get rid of these latter beings “past cure or amelioration”. There is simply no need for this, as nature, in his view, will do the job itself:

That which distinguishes degeneracy from the formation of new species (phylogeny) is, that the morbid variation does not continuously subsist and propagate itself, like one that is healthy, but, fortunately, is soon rendered sterile, and after a few generations often dies out before it reaches the lowest grade of organic degeneration.<sup>53</sup>

Under the National Socialists, on the other hand, what little hope of reform for the parasite was found in Nordau had been thoroughly extinguished. Neither were they content to leave to nature the weeding out of those thought not fit to live, but instead took the job upon themselves. One important aspect of this project is the choice of tool of extermination. As Bein points out:

Moreover, it may well be said that this image of the Jew contributed to the methods of extermination. As in the Middle Ages the Jew was slain and burned as Antichrist and Satan, so the method of killing Jews in the gas chamber was but a logical consequence of their final identification with parasites, cankers, bacilli and vermin. Once the Jews were really so regarded, it was not only imperative to exterminate them, it was also quite obvious that in the process the same means we use against bacilli and vermin was to be employed: poison gas.<sup>54</sup>

Edmund P. Russell III offers us an even more precise description. As he has shown in his “‘Speaking of Annihilation’: Mobilizing for War Against Human and Insect Enemies, 1914–1945” (1996), there is a horrible biopolitical irony behind the fact that Zyklon B – the hydrogen cyanide used for gassing the inmates of Auschwitz and other concentration camps – was in fact a pesticide previously used for combating lice; or,

as he puts it: “Metaphor and ‘reality’ blurred in Nazi rhetoric: Jews were exterminated as deliberately, and literally, as insects.”<sup>55</sup>

Russell makes a convincing case for the interconnectedness of entomology and war during the twentieth century, emerging out of the enormous advances made by modern economic entomology in combating agricultural destruction in the last half of the previous century.<sup>56</sup> As attested to by the cooperative ventures between German chemical industry conglomerate I.G. Farben and the Nazi government,<sup>57</sup> as well as the less known history of cooperation between the Bureau of Entomology and the Chemical Warfare Service in the US during the 1920s,<sup>58</sup> the two at times existed in what could easily be called a symbiotic relationship. This did not only result in the research and production of new insecticides that were also used as chemical weapons (and vice versa),<sup>59</sup> but also – and most importantly for the present discussion – through borrowing the language of the other part, thereby mutually strengthening each other: the military presented war and its enemies in terms taken from the natural sciences, especially from the battle against vermin of different sorts, while entomologists presented the task of pest control and extermination in terms of war. This can be seen in a penchant for the same metaphors, especially those concerning the “total extermination” of one’s enemies, be they people, insects or parasites. These “shared metaphors”, Russell claims,

helped military and civilian institutions shape and express the way people experienced both war and nature. [...] publicists described war as pest control, pest control as war, and the two endeavors as similar. On the one hand, describing war as pest control transformed participation in war from a potentially troubling moral issue to a moral virtue. [...] On the other hand, describing pest control as war helped entomologists portray nature as a battlefield, elevate the status of their profession, and mobilize resources.<sup>60</sup>

Addressing this transformation of war from a “potentially troubling moral issue to a moral virtue”, Russell touches upon a central point, namely the ease with which such metaphorical applications to people of traits taken from animals, insects and parasites lend themselves to dehumanizing practices: “By dehumanizing enemies, animal metaphors reduced the sense of guilt about killing human beings in battle. The ‘lower’ the phylum, the lower the sense of guilt, and few phyla ranked lower than insects.”<sup>61</sup> This corresponds well to what Gregory H. Stanton, in a briefing paper at the US State Department in 1996, calls the third of a total of eight stages of genocide. Under the heading of “Dehumanization”, it is described as follows:

One group denies the humanity of the other group. Members of it are equated with animals, vermin, insects or diseases. Dehumanization overcomes the normal human revulsion against murder. At this stage, hate propaganda in print and on hate radios is used to vilify the victim group.<sup>62</sup>

Here it can be asked, and rightly so, why this should have anything to do with liberal democracies. Obviously, in such societies a large number of checks and balances will tend to ensure that dehumanizing techniques are not taken to the same extremes as in the examples mentioned by Stanton: Nazi Germany, Rwanda, Burundi, the former Yugoslavia, Cambodia, etc. But that their excessive energies are curbed does not mean that such techniques are not also at work here. While they will often do so in a softer and more opaque way, all societies will need ways of drawing the boundary between inside and outside, between what (and who) should and should not be let in. More specifically, since borders are notoriously permeable, and influx of unwanted elements to some degree is unavoidable, all societies – the most modern and democratic ones not excluded – will also need ways of separating those elements which are deemed not to belong from those that do *inside* their own territories. It is here that the parasite – with all its connotations of a selfish intruder and an unwanted guest, of a danger to the health of its host organism – has served, and continues to serve, a special role, functioning as a powerful rhetorical tool for the creation of a class of subhumans which are not entitled to the same treatment and the same basic rights as ordinary citizens. While it would generally be hard to get away with exterminating such “parasites” outright, this does not mean that they can not be rounded up in camps or left to survive as best they can on the edges and in the interstices of society. It should

therefore not come as a surprise that accusations against illegal immigrants of parasitism – just to name perhaps the most obvious example – has been and is still a staple ingredient in nationalist and nativist rhetoric.<sup>63</sup>

## Reconceptualising the parasite

As I hope to have shown, there is no doubt that the concept of the parasite was the ultimate rhetorical tool which helped the National Socialists achieving their end of turning their enemies into *lebensuntwerten* *Leben*, “life that does not deserve to live.”<sup>64</sup> Nor is there any doubt that this procedure drew a lot of its venomous force from the scientific legitimacy it received through the late nineteenth century advent of parasitology, one of the by-products of which was the creation of a new figure of the parasite that mixed the human and the animal together to such a degree that a new space was opened up between them; a space later to be inhabited by those no longer counted as fully human and which could therefore legitimately be exterminated. Finally, I hope to have shown that although seldom framed in quite as blunt terms or dealt with in the same manner as the Nazis did, as a tool for dehumanization, the modern concept of the social parasite is still very powerful.

Interestingly, even though general public have still not been able to shake off the image of the parasite – both human and animal – that came into existence alongside the scientific field of parasitology in the last half of the nineteenth century, parasitologists themselves have increasingly begun to do so. I am here not referring to late nineteenth century adoption of additional concepts for describing different types of symbiotic relationships, since these in effect only divide such relationships into the morally “acceptable” (in the case of mutualisms, where both parties benefit from the association), the “ambiguous” (in the case of commensalisms, where one party benefits from the association, but without damaging the other) and the “unacceptable” (in the case of parasitisms proper), thereby leaving the negative implications of the latter wholly intact and uncontested. My point is rather that whereas the founding fathers of the field often viewed their object of research with considerable distaste, treating it as morally suspect, at best, their recent heirs have realized that the reality of parasitical relationships is far less clear-cut than someone like E. Ray Lankester and his contemporaries ever dreamt of.

Without going into details, scientists have for example come to the conclusion that a lack of parasites should not be understood as a sign of health, but rather the opposite, pointing to a world out of balance.<sup>65</sup> They have also stressed that being a successful parasite in fact involves a very high degree of specialization, as well as the ability to constantly modify your behaviour in order to adapt to an ever-changing habitat bent on your destruction.<sup>66</sup> Contrary to what social parasites are often accused of, their nonhuman namesakes are in other words far from “lazy”, since those that stagnate will finally be exterminated by their hosts, whose immune systems are in constant battles with the intruders. But this means that parasites are also important factors in the continual evolution of their hosts, who equally has to adapt to their adaptations (and vice versa), a phenomenon known as host-parasite coevolution. Even though it is difficult to prove once and for all that a given trait is the direct consequence of such processes,<sup>67</sup> there is no doubt that they function as an important factor in the continual renewal of life. As Carl Zimmer puts it: “Parasites have probably been driving the evolution of their hosts since the dawn of life itself.”<sup>68</sup>

This resonates well with a point made by Michel Serres in his *The Parasite*, where he draws our attention exactly to this important role of foreign bodies in causing the systems they are introduced into to evolve, thereby allowing us to see that nonhuman parasites actually bring a very important contribution to the table of the host, instead of simply take without giving anything in return:

The parasite is an exciter. Far from transforming a system, changing its nature, its form, its elements, its relations and its pathways the parasite makes it change states differentially. It inclines it. It makes the equilibrium of the energetic distribution fluctuate. It dopes it. It irritates it. It inflames it. Often this

inclination has no effect. But it can produce gigantic ones by chain reactions or reproduction.<sup>69</sup>

From their different vantage points, Zimmer and Serres thus allow us to see the parasite as a motor of evolution, causing newness to come into being, and life to endlessly proliferate through bringing about yet new (re)configurations. In itself, this is neither good nor bad, but it alerts us to the fact that a priori defining parasites as “useless”, “lazy” or “degenerate” simply will not do, precisely because it blinds us to the properly *creative* element involved in their work.<sup>70</sup> When seen in this light, the inadequacy of the label for describing human beings deemed to be damaging to society becomes obvious, allowing us to begin to force the discussion about how to deal with those not considered or treated as if they were fully human in another direction; one in which those who would like to keep them reduced to a state of animality will no longer have access to their perhaps most important rhetorical tool.

**Anders M.Y. Gullestad is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Linguistic, Literary and Aesthetic Studies at the University of Bergen.**

1. The latter is the case with the unfortunate caterpillars upon which the parasitoid wasps belonging to the family *Ichneumonidae* prey. In fact, these wasps seemed so cruel to Charles Darwin that he considered them a good argument against the existence of a God who loves all of creation: “I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the *Ichneumonidae* with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of Caterpillars.” (Darwin quoted in Carl Zimmer, *Parasite Rex* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), p. 15). ↵
2. James Connolly, “Let Us Free Ireland!” (1899), at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1899/xx/freeirld.htm> (last viewed on 22 February 2011). ↵
3. Ayn Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics” (1961), at [http://www.aynrand.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ari\\_ayn\\_rand\\_the\\_objectivist\\_ethics](http://www.aynrand.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ari_ayn_rand_the_objectivist_ethics) (last viewed on 22 February 2011). ↵
4. “Parasite”, at <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/137636?rskey=qsTV6n&result=1&isAdvanced=false#> (last viewed on 22 February 2011). ↵
5. W. Geoffrey Arnott, “Studies in Comedy, I: Alexis and the Parasite’s Name”, *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, 9:2 (Summer 1968), pp. 162—163. ↵
6. On the first, holy phase of the parasite’s historical trajectory, cf. the discussions in book six of *The Deipnosophists* (also known as *The Learned Banqueters*) by the Egyptian Hellenist Athenaeus, as well as Jonathan Z. Smith’s interesting analysis in “What a Difference a Difference Makes”. ↵
7. Arnott, “Studies in Comedy, I: Alexis and the Parasite’s Name”, p. 167. ↵
8. A lot has been written about the parasite as stock character in Greek and Latin comedy; cf. Cynthia Damon’s *The Mask of the Parasite: A Pathology of Roman Patronage* (1997), John Wilkins’s *The Boastful Chef. The Discourse of Food in Ancient Greek Comedy* (2000), pp. 71—86, and Anne Duncan’s *Performance and Identity in the Classical World* (2006), pp. 90—123. In his MA thesis, Goran Vidović has convincingly argued that a key text in the transition from the parasite as solely looking for food to looking for earthly riches in general, is the anonymous Latin comedy *Querolus siue Aulularia* (*The Complainer or The Pot of Gold*), probably written in the early fifth century A.D., chronicling the trickster Mandrogerus’s unsuccessful attempt of obtaining a pot of gold coins from an unsuspecting victim. As Vidović sees it, this self-designated parasite represents something entirely new: the merging of the traditional parasite and the *captator*, the legacy-hunter enriching himself through taking advantage of the gullibility of others: “to the best of our knowledge – until Mandrogerus appeared no comic parasite had been a *captator*. Mandrogerus is thus the unique representative of a profit-oriented parasite” (Goran Vidović, *Dish to Cash, Cash to Ash: The Last Roman Parasite and the Birth of a Comic Profession* (MA Thesis in Medieval Studies, Central European University, Budapest, 2009), p. 51). Whereas the thesis does not really follow this implication to its logical conclusion, it seems likely that here can be found one of the roots of the



social parasite, as it is later to be conceptualized under capitalism, where it will come to represent an affront not so much against common notions of hospitality as against work ethics in general. ↵

9. Sir Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica: or, Enquiries into Very many Received Tenents and Commonly Prefumed Truths*, 1646, Book II, Chapter VI, section 3, p. 78. ↵
10. Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopædia, or, An universal dictionary of arts and sciences : containing the definitions of the terms, and accounts of the things signify'd thereby, in the several arts, both liberal and mechanical, and the several sciences, human and divine : the figures, kinds, properties, productions, preparations, and uses, of things natural and artificial : the rise, progress, and state of things ecclesiastical, civil, military, and commercial : with the several systems, sects, opinions, &c : among philosophers, divines, mathematicians, physicians, antiquaries, critics, &c : the whole intended as a course of antient and modern learning. Volume the Second*, 1728, p. 351. ↵
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 350—351. ↵
12. As late as 1785, for example, this social meaning was still the only one included in Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language*, which defined parasite solely as "One that frequents rich tables, and earns his welcome by flattery" (Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language: In Which the Words Are Deduced From Their Originals, and Illustrated in their Different Significations by Examples From the Best Writers. To Which Are Prefixed, a History of the Language, and an English Grammar*. Vol II, the Sixth Edition. (London: J.F. and C. Rivington et. al., 1785), p. 277). As Jonathan Z. Smith notes in "What a Difference a Difference Makes", it is also revealing that the 1838 edition of *Allegemeine Encyklopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste* only featured a grand total of two sentences on botanical parasitism, as opposed to the preceding seven pages (13 columns), which were dedicated to issues relating to the social meanings of the term. ↵
13. A short note in *The Monthly Review*, mentioning the work of one M. Gleditsch on the parasitical plant *Cytinus hypocistis* claims that "The *Hypocistis* is one of that family of plants called parasites, and which we may, perhaps without much impropriety, term the cucows of the vegetable kingdom. They exceed this animal parasite however in rapacity and perseverance" (*The Monthly Review; or, Literary Journal. By Several Hands*, Vol. XL (London: R. Griffiths, 1769), p. 558). ↵
14. Friedrich Küchenmeister, *On Animal and Vegetable Parasites of the Human Body. A Manual of Their Natural History, Diagnosis, and Treatment*, Vol. I, translated by Edwin Lankester (London: Printed for the Sydenham Society, 1857), p. 4. Kirby and Spence, for example, only use the word host in designating large numbers, as in "hosts of insects of various kinds" (p. 145) or an "infinite host of flies" (William Kirby and William Spence, *An Introduction to Entomology, or Elements of the Natural History of Insects: With Plates*, Vol. 1, Fifth Edition (London: Printed for Longman et al., 1828), p. 286). ↵
15. Jonathan Z. Smith, "What a Difference a Difference Makes" (1984), *Relating Religion. Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 254. ↵
16. Edward S. Dunster, "The History of the Doctrine of Spontaneous Generation", *The Constitution and By-Laws of the Ann Arbor Scientific Association with the Proceedings for the Year Ending May 1, 1876* (Ann Arbor: Courier Steam Printing House, 1876), p. 157. ↵
17. Aristotle, *Historia Animalium*, translated by A.L. Peck (London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970), Vol. II, book V, part I, p. 99. ↵
18. Dalton quoted in Dunster, "The History of the Doctrine of Spontaneous Generation", p. 154. ↵
19. On the importance of Steenstrup and Küchenmeister's work – which, in the case of the latter, involved feeding bladder worms to men sentenced to die, then searching through their intestines after they had been executed – cf. Zimmer, *Parasite Rex*, pp. 6—10. The theory of spontaneous generation is often considered to have received the final nail in its coffin with Louis Pasteur's famous 1860 experiments on bottled broth, showing that microbes are transferred to their destination through the air, not generated ex nihilo. This did not stop many of his opponents, though: as late as 1876, for example,

- E.C. Seaman attacks the Pasteurian views espoused by Dunster, insisting that “the production de novo and without parentage, of an animal or vegetable organism, can arise under favorable circumstances” (p. 76), and that Pasteur’s theory is “unsound and fallacious” (Seaman, “On Spontaneous Generation”, *The Constitution and By-Laws of the Ann Arbor Scientific Association with the Proceedings for the Year Ending May 1, 1876* (Ann Arbor: Courier Steam Printing House, 1876), p. 77). ↵
20. On the knowledge of (what would later be termed) parasites prior to the modern age, cf. Reinhard Hoepli’s *Parasites and Parasitic Infections In Early Medicine and Science* (1959). ↵
  21. Han-liang Chang, “Notes Towards a Semiotics of Parasitism”, *Sign Systems Studies*, 31.2 (2003), p. 8. ↵
  22. Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, translated by Lawrence R. Schehr, with an introduction by Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2007 (1980)), p. 6. ↵
  23. As Daniela S. Barberis has argued, the formative process of sociology was for example shaped by exactly such an organicist thinking: “In 1870, the incipient concept of society was both frail and amorphous, and the need for and the possibility of a science that studied this entity were much in dispute. Thirty years later, neither the reality of society nor the need for sociology were any longer in question. Organicism was at the crux of this achievement – establishing the reality of ‘society’ by analogy to the organism” (Barberis, “In Search of an Object: Organicist Sociology and the Reality of Society in fin-de-siècle France”, *History of the Human Sciences*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2003), p. 52). Seeking scientific legitimacy through adopting the methods of evolutionary biology and cell theory, organicist sociology treated social evolution as part of the wider category of biological evolution, thus subject to the general laws of nature, just like any other living entity. ↵
  24. The late nineteenth century saw the co-existence and partial overlapping of Darwinian and Lamarckian evolutionary models. As Lankester’s work clearly shows, Darwinians were by no means averse to the theory of degeneration. Even so, Snaith Gissis has argued that, due to its stress on heredity (which Darwin could not account for), the theory originally arose out of a Lamarckian context: “These (Lamarckian) theories dwelt on the gradual transformation of the *whole* species (‘transformism’) as an indispensable component in the process by which complexity was reached, i.e., a developmental rather than a selectionist mechanism. Direct adaptation to the environment on the basis of trait and habit formations was a core factor in this mechanism. The subsidiary notion of degeneration had arisen *within* this conceptualization” (Snaith Gissis, “Late Nineteenth Century Lamarckism and French Sociology”, *Perspectives on Science*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring 2002), p. 73). On the evolution of Lamarck’s thought, see also Gissis’s “Interactions Between Social and Biological Thinking: The Case of Lamarck” (2009). ↵
  25. Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration. A European Disorder, c.1848–c.1918*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 (1989)), p. 8. ↵
  26. *Ibid.*, p. 15. ↵
  27. Pick limits his research to the period 1848–1918, but admits that this is a somewhat random choice: “It may well be that we have to look to 1945 rather than 1914 to find degeneration really in retreat, truly and consistently a matter of mainstream scientific disavowal and embarrassment. For by then degeneration appeared inextricably intertwined with the web of fascist-ideology, the evils of the Nazi doctors, the unfathomable full horror of ‘The Final Solution’.” (*Ibid.*, p. 237). ↵
  28. *Ibid.*, pp. 202–203. ↵
  29. On Lankester’s importance and views, cf. Carl Zimmer’s *Parasite Rex*, especially pp. 15–22, and Pick’s *Faces of Degeneration*, pp. 216–218. ↵
  30. Cf. the views implicit in Lankester’s definition of “elaboration”, which he sees as “a gradual change of structure in which the organism becomes adapted to more and more varied and complex conditions of existence. In Elaboration there is a new expression of form, corresponding to the new perfection of

work in the animal machine” (E. Ray Lankester, “Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism”, *The Advancement of Science. Occasional Essays & Addresses* (London and New York: MacMillan and Co, 1890), p. 27). ↵

31. *Ibid.* ↵

32. *Ibid.*, p. 48. To him, this risk was present even in the most advanced civilizations, that which he belonged to not excepted; or as he puts it: “Possibly we are all drifting, tending to the condition of intellectual Barnacles or Ascidians” (*Ibid.*). ↵

33. On contemporaries – ranging from scientists to political theorists, criminologists and novelists – addressing social problems in terms of biology in somewhat similar manners, *cf.* Pick’s thorough discussion of the similarities and differences between the respective situations in France (from Morel to Buchez, Taine, Zola, Le Bon, Magnan, etc.), Italy (Lombroso and the Italian School of Positivist Criminology, etc.) and England (Conan Doyle, Stoker, Galton, Dohrn, Booth, Maudsley, etc.) in *Faces of Degeneration*. ↵

34. Here it should be remembered that one of the necessary preconditions for this reshaping of the parasite, is the fundamental destabilisation of the relationship between man and animal that resulted from Darwin’s work. What he had shown, first implicitly in *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and then explicitly in *The Descent of Man* (1871), was that this difference was not absolute, as held by Christianity: “the difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind” (Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, with an introduction by John Tyler Bonner and Robert M. May (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981 (1871)), p. 105). The question of where individuals and groups perceived as less evolved should be placed on the scale leading from the lowest (*i.e.* parasites) to the highest creatures (civilized men), was by many therefore understood as pointing not to the domain of figurative speech, but to biological reality. ↵

35. Zimmer, *Parasite Rex*, p. 18. ↵

36. See Agamben’s *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995). While not something Agamben himself has pursued, others have noted the close bonds between the parasite and the *homo sacer*, *cf.* Oliver C. Speck’s “Parasites and Para-Sites” (2005) and Stephen Crocker’s “Noises and Exceptions. Pure Mediality in Serres and Agamben” (2007). ↵

37. Other related examples would include the portrayal of Japanese as “lice” by Americans during World War II, as well as the Hutu’s references to the Tutsi minority as “cockroaches” during the Rwandan Genocide of 1994. ↵

38. Quoted in Alex Bein, “The Jewish Parasite. Notes on the Semantics of the Jewish Problem, with special Reference to Germany”, *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*, Vol. 9, number 1, 1964, pp. 33—34. ↵

39. *Ibid.*, p. 6. ↵

40. *Ibid.*, p. 7. ↵

41. The reference is from the chapter “Hebrews” in *Ideas for the Philosophy of History of Humanity*: “The People of God, once endowed by Heaven itself with a fatherland, have been for thousands of years, nay almost since the time of their beginning, a parasitical plant on the trunk of other nations; a tribe of cunning jobbers, spread over nearly the whole earth, they nowhere show, in spite of all oppression, a longing for honour and for a place of their own, a fatherland” (Herder quoted in Bein, “The Jewish Parasite”, p. 10). ↵

42. *Ibid.*, p. 6. ↵

43. As Bein puts it: “The concept ‘parasite’ merges by open or hidden association with the age-old image of the Jew, an association from former epochs of history forming, so to speak, the deeper geological layers of the popular perception of the Jew. The devil, the blood-sucking usurer, the exploiter, the international conspirator as depicted in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and the mythological

figure of the vampire are synonymously used with parasite, despite the fact that the original term ‘parasite’ had nothing to do with those designations” (*Ibid.*, p. 18). ↵

44. *Ibid.*, p. 10. ↵

45. *Ibid.*, p. 4. ↵

46. Jacques Kornberg, *Theodor Herzl: From Assimilation to Zionism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 164. ↵

47. Noah Efron, *Real Jews: Secular Versus Ultra-Orthodox: The Struggle for Jewish Identity in Israel* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), p. 60. The perhaps clearest recent expression of this can be found in the Israeli free market liberal party Shinui, who have exploited the image of the Haredi parasite for all it is worth. This can for example be seen in a commercial for the 2006 elections, showing a large number of ultra-Orthodox Jews attaching themselves – parasite-like – to a secular voter, only to vanish into thin air when he votes Shinui. ↵

48. Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, translated from the second edition of the German work; introduction by George L. Mosse (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993 (1892)), p. 309. ↵

49. *Ibid.* ↵

50. Rosenberg quoted in Bein, “The Jewish Parasite”, p. 22. ↵

51. “(T)he present degenerate tendencies are pursued by many who are only victims to fashion and certain cunning impostures, and these misguided ones we may hope to lead back to right paths” (Nordau, *Degeneration*, p. 551). ↵

52. *Ibid.* ↵

53. *Ibid.*, p. 16. ↵

54. Bein, “The Jewish Parasite”, pp. 36—37. ↵

55. Edmund P. Russell III, “‘Speaking of Annihilation’: Mobilizing for War Against Human and Insect Enemies, 1914—1945”, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 82, No. 4 (March 1996), p. 1520. Hydrogen cyanides (also known as prussic acids) had been used for fumigating purposes since the nineteenth century, but were first tried out in battle on human enemies during World War I. Because Zyklon B proved inefficient in open air, it did not become popular for the extermination of people until the National Socialists realized it was far better for killing humans stored together in concentrated spaces than carbon monoxide, which had previously been used, for example in Chelmno and Treblinka II. ↵

56. On changing agricultural practices and the rise of economic entomology during the nineteenth century, cf. John F. Clark’s *Bugs and the Victorians* (2009). ↵

57. On I.G. Farben’s role in the production of Zyklon B, see Russell, “‘Speaking of Annihilation’: Mobilizing for War Against Human and Insect Enemies, 1914—1945”, p. 1521: “Indirectly, I.G. Farben supported and profited from the SS campaign against Jews. I.G. Farben manufactured Degesch’s Zyklon B at its Leverkusen plant. I.G. Farben owned 42.5 percent of Degesch, as well as one-third of Degussa, which owned another 42.5 percent of Degesch. Several members of Degesch’s supervisory board came from I.G. Farben. Partly as a result of increased sales of Zyklon B, dividends to the owners of Degesch in 1942, 1943, and 1944 were twice those in 1940 and 1941”. See also Peter Hayes’ *From Cooperation to Complicity. Degussa in the Third Reich* (2004), esp. pp. 272—300. ↵

58. See Russell, “‘Speaking of Annihilation’: Mobilizing for War Against Human and Insect Enemies, 1914—1945”, esp. pp. 1513—1518. ↵

59. I.G. Farben’s Gerhard Schrader, for example, was not only responsible for the discovery of new and effective organophosphorus insecticides, but also – through variations of these – of creating lethal organophosphate nerve gases such as tabun, sarin and – after the war – cyclosarin, all of which were classified as weapons of mass destruction in United Nations Security Council Resolution 687, adopted

in 1991. According to Russell, “(w)hen Schrader sprayed chemicals on insects, he was in fact screening chemical weapons” (Russell, “‘Speaking of Annihilation’: Mobilizing for War Against Human and Insect Enemies, 1914—1945”, p. 1519). ↵

60. *Ibid.*, p. 1509. ↵

61. *Ibid.*, p. 1512. Even though the quote in many ways can be said to contain a very succinct description of such dehumanizing mechanisms, here a weakness becomes obvious. I am not so much talking about Russell’s erroneous labelling of insects as a phylum – according to taxonomic rank, they belong to the class *Insecta*, which belongs to the phylum *Arthropoda* – but rather that he unfortunately makes no effort to distinguish between parasites and insects. While the two will no doubt have a tendency of blurring into each other in dehumanizing discourse, it is important that they be analytically kept apart: contrary to what he seems to think, it is not the latter, but the former which are generally considered to be at the very bottom of the hierarchy of life. ↵

62. Parts of the description of the seventh stage – “Extermination” – are also worth quoting: “Extermination begins, and quickly becomes the mass killing legally called ‘genocide.’ It is ‘extermination’ to the killers because they do not believe their victims to be fully human” (Gregory H. Stanton, “The 8 Stages of Genocide” (1998), at <http://www.genocidewatch.org/aboutgenocide/8stagesofgenocide.html> (last viewed on 22 February 2011)). ↵

63. Cf. Jonathan Xavier Inda’s “Foreign Bodies: Migrants, Parasites, and the Pathological Nation” (2000). ↵

64. On this concept, see Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, pp. 136—143. ↵

65. For a plethora of concrete examples why life without parasites would neither be advantageous nor possible, cf. Zimmer’s *Parasite Rex* and Marlene Zuk’s *Riddled With Life* (2007). ↵

66. Cf. Claude Combes’s *The Art of Being a Parasite* (2005). ↵

67. Just to give an example, one commonly held hypothesis of why sexual reproduction evolved, is that in increasing genetic diversity, it allows better protection for hosts against parasites than does reproduction through cloning, as well as better protection against the defense systems of the hosts for the parasites; in the words of Claude Combes: “Now, in higher species, thanks to the recombination of genes during meiosis, sexuality is a powerful mechanism for increasing diversity originally spawned by mutations. We are then entitled to ask the question, Does sexuality exist in host species simply to help them struggle against parasites, and does it exist in parasite species only because it helps them resist host defenses? Most evolutionists would say yes, although the question is still controversial” (Combes, *The Art of Being a Parasite*, transl. Daniel Simberloff (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005 (2001)), p. 170). What is known as the Hamilton-Zuk hypothesis claims parasites may also be the reason why sexual selection evolved. More specifically, the acquisition of costly traits such as a long tail or bright plumage often found in males of sexually dimorphous birds is argued to be a way of showing off one’s lack of or resistance to parasites to females, cf. William D. Hamilton and Marlene Zuk’s “Heritable True Fitness and Bright Birds: A Role for Parasites?” (1982). ↵

68. Zimmer, *Parasite Rex*, p. 159. ↵

69. Serres, *The Parasite*, p. 191. ↵

70. This creative aspect is the topic of my article “Literature and the Parasite” (Deleuze Studies, Vol. 5, No. 3, 2011, pp. 301-323). Taking J.L. Austin’s famous dismissal in *How To Do Things With Words* (1962) of literary language as “parasitic” upon normal language as a starting point, I here explore the similarities between Serres’ definition of the parasite and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of “minor literature”, arguing that the parasite-host relationship might supply us with a model for thinking about the world-shaping abilities of literary texts. ↵

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