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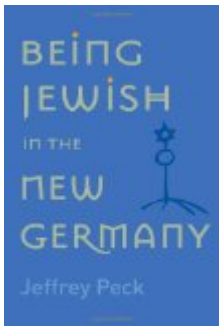
Jeffrey M. Peck. *Being Jewish in the New Germany.* New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2006. xix + 215 pp. $24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8135-3723-8.



Reviewed by Anthony Kauders

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This book was written for an American (Jewish) readership. But some chapters, especially the first two, address the non-specialist, while others, especially the last two, accommodate the expert. The work contains one theme and one thesis. The theme is simple and to be welcomed: Americans, and American Jews in particular, need to understand that Germany has changed and that its Jewish community is made up of more than just a few souls morbidly attached to blood-soaked soil. We are therefore introduced to Jewish writers, politicians and intellectuals; to Jews of Russian origin, German background and Israeli descent; and to the many issues facing today's German-Jewish community of 100,000 plus members. Peck discusses the role of the Holocaust in German and American political life. He relates how Russian Jews have begun to take over community institutions, revitalizing German Jewry especially in Berlin and the provinces. And he compares and contrasts the situation of Turks and Jews today, whom many Germans still perecive as foreign, no matter how acculturated they happen to be. All of this material is interesting, but not new.

The elements of Peck's argument read something like this: First, Jewishness today can mean different things to different people, so that we ought to scrap the notion of Jewish authenticity; second, new constructions of Jewish identity should be embraced, whether in the form of bagel fetishism, klezmer fervor or Jewish-museum-crawling; and finally, Russian Jews can only become part of German Jewry if the community leadership acknowledges the first two points. Whereas the book's theme is a much-needed corrective to widespread ignorance, the thesis needs to be examined in greater detail. Peck's position corresponds to that of Diana Pinto, who has repeatedly called on European Jews to become a counterweight to American Jewry on the one hand and Israel on the other. For her, the mere existence of Jews in the heartland of genocide is proof that the Shoah can be transcended. This recognition sets Europe's Jews apart from their brethren in New York and Jerusalem, "for whom the Holocaust has become a frozen memory" (p. 122). But Peck moves beyond this traditional concern with power, influence and cultural allure. Instead, he seeks to "highlight the fluidity of mean-

ings traditionally associated with Israel and the Diaspora" as well as to expand the very concept of Jewishness (p.155). He writes: "Jewish museums such as those in Berlin, Vienna, or Prague, Jewish cafés and restaurants, or Jewish cultural festivals, while not 'really Jewish,' that is, produced by 'real Jews,' create sites for Jews and non-Jews alike to experience Jewish history, ritual, and tradition. Just as branding an automobile as 'made in America' whose parts are imported from around the world and assembled by immigrant labor, a state of pure 'Jewishness' is no longer achievable" (p. 123). Peck thus champions two creeds, namely diaspora existence, which, in the words of Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, can be seen as "a positive resource in the necessary thinking of models of polity in the current erosion and questioning of the modern nation-state and ideal" (p. 156); and postmodern hybridity, which, in the words of Paul Gilroy, can be seen as a "chaotic, living, disorganic formation" that gives "no ground to the suggestion that cultural fusion involves betrayal, loss, corruption, or dilution."[1]

Peck's view is important. Indeed, it is much more consistent than the work of other figures within Jewish Studies who appropriate postcolonialist discourse but do not accept its consequences. That is, where Peck employs such concepts as hybridity and diaspora to advance the argument that Jewishness can mean almost anything today, other scholars, such as the Boyarins or Susannah Heschel, adopt postcolonial language but insist that Judaism remains unaffected by Christian hegemony. This volume, then, is that rare example of a book in Jewish Studies in which postmodernism is taken to its logical conclusion. Peck not only proffers the idea of the decentered subject whose "identity" always retreats beyond its grasp, he also concludes that today's decentered subjects construct decentered Judaisms from various decentered bits and pieces, memories and projections, traditions and impositions. In terms of postmodern logic, this stance is absolutely convincing.

But questions remain. First, idealizations of diaspora existence sideline the fact that minorities have often had to suffer in diaspora settings. In the case of Germany, many Jews remain steadfast in linking their "German-Jewish identity" with the capacity of the Federal Republic to fight antisemitism and other forms of prejudice. In other words, however much bagels and museums and klezmer may contribute to new Jewish spaces, once democracy is at risk, Jewishness immediately revolves around the question of powerlessness and persecution. Second, there is a tendency to make claims for the privileged visionary potential of diaspora existence, although it is well known that the diaspora does not necessarily entail the subversion of racism or nationalism within minority cultures themselves or in their relationships with other minorities in a given state. Finally, the potential benefits of hybridity notwithstanding, it is simply unrealistic to assume that Jews will stop saying what Jewishness is not--or stop wondering where it might begin and where it might end. Even if Peck is right in arguing that essentialism and authenticity are hopelessly outmoded concepts in today's postmodernist West, self-understanding implies that groups reflect on how they might differ from other groups within society. And it is fair to say that, in the case of Germany, bagels and klezmer are still not very high on the list of Jewish prerogatives.

Note

[1]. Paul Gilroy, ***The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*** (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 122 and 144.

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