

Ken Koltun-Fromm. *Material Culture and Jewish Thought in America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. xi + 342 pp. \$26.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-22183-4.



Reviewed by Stephen J. Whitfield

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Matter is palpable, the lexicographers tell us; it has weight and occupies space. But what is material culture? Nowhere does Ken Koltun-Fromm distinguish it from culture itself; and the approach that he adopts in exploring the ways that Jews have studied physical objects is noteworthy for its eclecticism. Anything goes. The promise he makes in explaining his aim is nevertheless straightforward. In the twentieth century, he writes, “Jews fashioned a material Jewish identity in America. It is an identity steeped in the magnetic and alluring quality of things.” Moreover “Jews were profoundly embedded in the very culture that provoked their own musings on identity and materiality. The dynamic interplay between American Jewish thought and culture is the subject of this study” (p. 2). What Koltun-Fromm has vowed to target not only raises hopes of exploring uncharted scholarly territory, but also hints at an enticing revisionism. For what his book seems designed to repudiate is a common belief that the Jewish mind tends toward abstraction. From cosmology to Marxist exegesis, from the unconscious

to utopianism, from mathematics to theoretical physics, gifted Jews have shown a proclivity for transcending the mundane. The Nobel laureate Max Born, for example, helped develop quantum theory. But this book instead takes up the musical suggestion of Born’s granddaughter, pop princess Olivia Newton-John: let’s get physical.

Material Culture and Jewish Thought in America embraces a diverse--and quite unpredictable--collection of objects: the diaries of the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, Mordecai Kaplan, which he composed while formulating the ideas that would animate his major work, *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934); the struggle to confront and outflank the past, as evidenced in the writings of the pioneering public relations counselor Edward L. Bernays, the Reform rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman, and the leftist psychoanalyst Erich Fromm; the image of the city of God that casts a shadow over the city itself in the meditations of the Orthodox thinker and educator Joseph B. Soloveitchik; the evocation of the seventh day of the week in Abraham Joshua Heschel’s tribute to

The Sabbath (1951); the conflicts between old world and new, tradition and change that are recorded in the works of litterateurs like Anzia Yezierska, Philip Roth, Cynthia Ozick, and Bernard Malamud; and finally some covers of the feminist magazine *Lilith*. In their various ways, these incommensurable figures and the texts they produced disclose the challenge of relating past to present; of reconciling a distinctive heritage with the pressure of change; and of sustaining the evolving, up-for-grabs link between the individual and the collective in a nation that makes selfhood and autonomy the touchstone of well-being.

But the meaning of material culture for American Jewry remains puzzling, and to read a book that neither makes sense of its very subject nor showcases credible examples is an exasperating experience. Failing to demonstrate that the encounter with physical objects is a distinguishable subset of Jewish culture (or of cultural studies), the author finds himself dealing with the ideas and insights that are normally part of intellectual history, rather than with the writers and thinkers who have reflected on the quiddity of palpable forms (or what he awkwardly calls “thinginess”). Koltun-Fromm might, for example, have shown prayer books as endowed with a history of their own—their conception, their printing, and their distribution—as expressions of a phenomenon that is real but impalpable, like religion. He might have examined how the community responded to and absorbed prayer books. But the author, who teaches religious studies at Haverford College, consistently avoids pursuing the sorts of inquiry, whether the history of the book or the history of photography, that have made cultural history so vibrant and popular an academic field. Whether it be the critical reception or the sales figures of the books he analyzes, or even the immediate biographical or historical circumstances that might have instigated the special concerns that mark such volumes, Koltun-Fromm fails to exhibit the sort of curiosity that would enable the reader to gain a fresh appreciation of the place of such texts

in the stream of the American Jewish past. When he writes that “*self* and *past* are material because physical things, experiences, and persons constitute the meaning of American Jewish identity and heritage,” the word “material” has been stripped of the specificity and precision that make terms intelligible in normal usage (p. 108). When he calls language itself “material,” because “the languages we speak tie us to place and past, and inform our ethical duties as witnesses to heritage,” surely he means “moral” rather than “material” (p. 212).

The absence of a coherent, explicit strategy that defines the character of Jewish material culture is most fully exposed in its applications and illustrations. Why include Bernays, for example? What makes him—of all people—a personification of Jewish thought? Bernays did not leave behind a paper trail of meditations on Jewish identity—not even his own. Koltun-Fromm also writes as though Bernays invented the field of public relations all by himself, which is not true; Ivy Lee, a less self-conscious and oddly less self-promoting rival deserves (if that is *le mot juste*) credit for creating the enterprise of creating events as well. Nor does Koltun-Fromm seem aware of the difference between public relations and advertising. The section on Bernays—indeed the chapter on him, Liebman, and Fromm—cannot be dismissed as anomalous; it typifies the eccentricity of the author’s choices. All three writers are described as seeking, through their books, to confront or evade the past. But that past is in fact immaterial, in Koltun-Fromm’s *own* account, consisting primarily of the concealed drives that Bernays (who was Sigmund Freud’s nephew) and Fromm (who was Freud’s acolyte and trimmer) sought to tap for their own wildly divergent purposes. And Rabbi Liebman, whose appreciation of Freud Koltun-Fromm exaggerates, sought to put debilitating anxieties to rest or to convert needs into benign ends. What this has to do with material culture is utterly mystifying.

The author is sensitive to the revision of strict gender roles that modern life has increasingly mandated. In this respect his treatment of Liebman's *Peace of Mind* (1946) is rather censorious. That book, Koltun-Fromm complains, gives "stereotypical examples of male business executives and female homemakers," and thus reassures "the American male" with "comforting models" of privileged paths to success. He adds: "For Liebman, men master and women relate" (p. 90). How Liebman is expected to have transcended the "gender biases" of his time, Koltun-Fromm fails to explain. (Betty Friedan herself had graduated from Smith College only four years before *Peace of Mind* appeared.) He also swoops down on *The Art of Loving* (1956), because Fromm sharply distinguished male from female ("adventurousness" from "motherliness," "penetration" from "productive receptiveness," etc.). Even as *Material Culture and Jewish Thought in America* acknowledges some unfairness to such criticism, the author asserts that such a division between male ambition and female support cannot be dismissed as "innocent" (p. 91). That may be why, to chart social change, he picks a handful of magazine covers from *Lilith* (though no example of graphic art exceeds the lapidary power of Art Spiegelman's visionary Valentine in 1993 to Hasidic-black love in the *New Yorker*).

Yet the feminist ethos is dropped, without explanation, when Koltun-Fromm deals with the author of two books that bear obviously gender-biased titles: *Halakhic Man* (1944) and *The Lonely Man of Faith* (1965). In this respect Soloveitchik is cut considerable slack. Koltun-Fromm portrays him as, in effect, a walker in the city, attached to the "urban holy," and therefore cursed by loneliness, because "the Rav" "wanted to remain *in* the city," even as his coreligionists were decamping in the suburbs (p. 139). The interpretive burden of Koltun-Fromm's chapter on Soloveitchik depends entirely on the claim that "world" and "city" are interchangeable in his writings. But no actual evidence or direct quotation is offered to support

this interpretation of his meaning, as though somehow the Mosaic law that Soloveitchik explicated in fact owed much to Robert Moses. The contours of Boston and New York, where Soloveitchik lived, are not described, even though Koltun-Fromm has presumably sought through this book to correct the imbalance in Jewish historiography between place and time. The lineaments of his subject therefore remain elusive, and the examples he considers come across as capricious and as representative of nothing larger. A half-dozen other illustrative choices might have been less random—or perhaps no more warranted, given the indecipherable method that *Material Culture and Jewish Thought in America* deploys. In themes begin responsibilities.

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