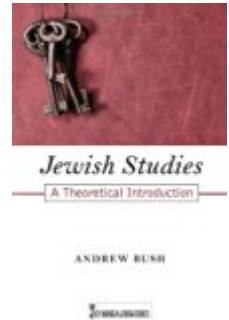


Andrew Bush. *Jewish Studies: A Theoretical Introduction*. Key Words in Jewish Studies Series. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011. xii + 150 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8135-4954-5.



Reviewed by Sebastian Wogenstein

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

Andrew Bush's slim and densely written book, *Jewish Studies: A Theoretical Introduction*, does not aim to provide a comprehensive inventory of the academic field of Jewish studies. In fact, Bush argues that what counts as "Jewish contents" (which Gershom Scholem, in his correspondence with Walter Benjamin, once claimed as the subject of Jewish studies) is far from self-evident or indisputable. Instead of "Jewish contents," Bush is interested in "Jewish aspects," exploring "the relationship between Jewish lives and certain books, life practices, and material culture" (p. 2). He likens his conception of "Jewish studies" to Benjamin's fascination with surprising intersections among texts and material culture, much of it fragmented, calling it a field of scholarship and teaching "for which Jewishness is not a predetermined container, but a question that we are learning to pose" (p. 10). In drawing on Scholem and Benjamin's correspondence as a way of introducing his understanding of Jewish studies, Bush provides more than a historical example. In reading their exchange of letters and ideas about what

Jewish studies might mean and relating their differences to our contemporary questions, Bush is already putting his view of Jewish studies into practice.

As the first volume in the Rutgers University Press series Key Words in Jewish Studies, which Bush edits along with Deborah Dash Moore and MacDonald Moore, Bush's book is meant to set the tone and provide a basic organizational model for all subsequent volumes. Each includes three sections: "Terms of the Debate," "State of the Question," and "In a New Key." The goal of the series, in which three additional volumes have been published so far (Barbara Mann's *Space and Place in Jewish Studies* [2012]; Olga Litvak's *Haskalah: The Romantic Movement in Judaism* [2012]; and Jonathan Boyarin's *Jewish Families* [2013]), is to consider key words in Jewish studies—words that "act as magnets and attract a nexus of ideas and arguments as well as related terms into their orbits" (p. x). But the series also promises to go beyond the boundaries of the field. Its main goals include putting those key words in conversation

with scholarship in other fields and disciplines as well as understanding their reverberations in popular culture.

The book's first section, "Terms of Debate," illustrates Bush's methodological approach to Jewish studies and the scope of his study. In contradistinction to "Jewish learning" as a religious practice, Bush defines "Jewish studies" as the "study of Jews" (p. 4). In this context, religion and ethnicity primarily become sources of metaphors signifying ways of belonging. Methodologically, "studying Jews" also means leaning toward ethnography and cultural history, a hermeneutical undertaking always mindful of the lifeworlds that contribute significantly to the imagination of collective identities. For the author, this also means that modernity in its complexity and disruptions of tradition ought to be considered an authentic source for Jewish studies.

One of Bush's examples is Hannah Arendt's post-Shoah biography of Rahel Levin Varnhagen (*Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess* [1957]). Bush takes the secular twentieth-century philosopher's account of the turn-of-the-nineteenth-century writer who converted to Christianity as an opportunity to illustrate his understanding of Jewish studies. A Jewish woman doubly marginalized, Varnhagen is portrayed by Arendt as the author of her own life and the maker of her affiliations, including her religious affiliations. Bush sees Varnhagen by way of Arendt's biography as "a new Jewish voice," one that allows Arendt to reflect on her own nontraditional Jewishness. Against the sympathetic critique of Arendt's mentor Karl Jaspers—that her focus on Varnhagen's Jewishness is too parochial, that it obfuscates the more pressing question of *universal* human rights—Bush defends Arendt's approach and asserts that "studying even a single Jew, as long as she is studied as a Jew, makes Jewish Studies function as liberation politics" (p. 18). Instead of excluding Varnhagen on the basis of her conversion to Christianity, listening to her voice and striving to understand her

decisions in their larger context are liberating for Jewish studies as well.

Although Bush criticizes Jewish studies for long having focused almost exclusively on Ashkenazi Jews, his book itself leans heavily toward Ashkenaz or, more precisely, German Jewish and American Ashkenazi figures. The programmatic "move beyond Ashkenaz" that Bush promises in the introduction remains curiously underdeveloped (p. 5). Only Spain receives somewhat substantial attention as a "test case for a polycentric revision" of Jewish studies (p. 44). Bush does offer examples of scholarship on Iberian Jews that indicates a trajectory of increased awareness of cultural hybridity and heterogeneity, including, for instance, *conversos*, the "other Jews." With a few notable exceptions, however, other Sephardic and Mizrahi studies topics are largely absent.

Hybridity and heterogeneity reappear in the book's second section, "State of the Question." Centering his discussion on the key words "identity" and "memory," Bush shows how in current Jewish studies the boundaries of Jewish identities are best understood as interfaces. Instead of reverting to the "trope of a separate Jewish world" in which "the Jewishness of a Jewish identity is that which is separable from admixture and bounded by a canon," he defines identity as "a conglomerate of disparate elements, simultaneously present, but differentially active" (p. 62). This enables the recognition of different subject positions *within* various Jewish identities as well as their relationships with other subject positions. Bush's interdisciplinary orientation is particularly noticeable when he engages scholars in anthropology, history, political philosophy, and feminist and queer theory, including Jonathan Boyarin, Caroline Walker Bynum, and Marla Brettschneider, to mention only a few.

Since identity and memory are closely linked social processes, it is no surprise that Bush sees Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's seminal work *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (1982), and

Amos Funkenstein's famous critique (*Perceptions of Jewish History* [1993]), as central to current Jewish studies discourse on these themes. In keeping with his central concern of "provincializing Ashkenaz," Bush points in this context to the importance of Gerson D. Cohen's critical edition of Abraham Ibn Daud's *Sefer Ha-Qabbalah* (1967) and S. D. Goitein's multi-volume *A Mediterranean Society* (1967-93). Goitein's approach, involving microhistories and a focus on everyday material culture, leads Bush to discuss ethnographically inflected histories of memory sites relevant to the experiences of major Jewish populations in non-Jewish environments. Among them are works by Irving Howe on the immigrant population in New York City (*World of Our Fathers* [1976]), Anita Shapira on the ideological framework of remembering conflicts in British Mandate Palestine (*Land and Power* [1992]), and Joëlle Bahloul on a family home in an Algerian town (*The Architecture of Memory* [1996]).

Bush begins and ends "State of the Question" with reflections on survival. Jewish studies after Auschwitz, he clarifies, cannot be understood without the paramount imperative of survival, and present debates on identity and memory in Jewish studies cannot be understood without the Shoah at least in the background. Yet Bush sees another keyword on the rise as well: the notion of the "courtyard." In Bahloul's ethnography, for example, the courtyard is a shared meeting place for Jews and Muslims, "an intermediate place between the street and the home, a symbolic extension of each."^[1] In a similar manner, Cynthia M. Baker's discussion of the *eruv* allows her to treat this extension of the home into courtyard and alleyway metaphorically, in Bush's words, "as a theoretical frame through which to reread the intent, if not the method, of rabbinic dicta" (p. 83). In these and other works, the courtyard provides a metaphor for a shared disciplinary space with permeable bounds in which many and different voices can be heard. These voices are not restricted to canonical texts; rather, the courtyard is an

open space that welcomes those who may not "re-side" within the boundaries of the field and leaves room for voices that might not survive otherwise.

Bush's final section, "In a New Key," is an attempt to put such an open forum into practice. This unconventional composition is composed of quotations and brief commentary, only a few of them longer than two or three paragraphs. It begins with a "Cast of Characters" and stage directions for an open house or "a Jewish Studies classroom ... before the teacher arrives" (p. 95). The voices include some with canonical status in Jewish studies, from Yehuda Halevi to Moshe Idel; a wide mix of Jewish writers from Franz Kafka and Edmond Jabès to Shulamith Hareven and Nicole Krauss; and philosophers and critics, from Franz Rosenzweig and Theodor Adorno to Hélène Cixous and Susan Sontag.

For a scholarly book, and especially for a self-characterized introduction to a field, such an artistic arrangement of theory fragments is certainly unusual. Its value lies in allowing the reader to creatively recognize constellations of ideas across time and disciplines. Its limitation, however, is that Bush leaves much of this work up to the reader. This section may serve well as the basis for discussion with eager and advanced students, yet to appreciate it, or the book as a whole, advanced familiarity with the authors quoted and their works is indispensable. Certainly an enjoyable exercise for those trained in Jewish studies and critical theory, it will likely be a tough read for novices.

The book contains a few inaccuracies (Adorno, e.g., returned to West Germany, not East Germany, several years after the war [p. 94]; Raphael Lemkin originally introduced the term "genocide" in his 1944 study *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, although it is correct that he is to be credited for the legally binding definition in the 1948 U.N. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide [p. 50]), but they affect neither Bush's conclusions nor his overall

argument. Apart from a more expanded focus on Mizrahi studies, I would also have liked to read more about how scholarship on premodern Jews contributes to the new direction of Jewish studies “beyond Ashkenaz.”

These minor reservations aside, I find Bush’s book a fascinating and thought-provoking inquiry into the history and current state of the field of Jewish studies that helpfully exposes its blind spots and offers an ambitious agenda for its future.

Note

[1]. Joëlle Bahloul, *The Architecture of Memory: A Jewish-Muslim Household in Colonial Algeria 1937-1962*, trans. Catherine du Péloux Ménagé (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 42, quoted in book under review, 83.

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