
Reviewed by David Meola (University of British Columbia)
Published on H-Judaic (May, 2014)
Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

**Cutting off and Re-attaching Jewish Identity in the Modern Era**

When thinking about German history over the extended nineteenth century (up to World War Two), the Jewish Question is continually debated. For many individuals, German Jewish identity was something with which each person had to come to grips. The collective identity of German Jews was also complex; however, there was not necessarily a common way to express such identity, regardless of the creation of Jewish organizations, such as the Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens (Central Organization of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith). Identity formation was a seemingly individualized process, something that was constrained and shaped by contemporaneous discourses. Jay Geller’s book, *The Other Jewish Question: Identifying the Jew and Making Sense of Modernity*, follows these discourses through a series of nine chapters that trace how Jews, non-Jews, and Jewish apostates dealt with the interrelated ideas about Jewishness that circulated within their respective time periods. Geller draws from numerous sources and covers a wide chronology in presenting how the process of identification, not identity, takes center stage in these discourses, especially given the instability and disputed nature of such Jewish identities.

The key to understanding this book is through a detailed reading and rereading of the introduction, especially the first seven pages. While it would be possible to see the body as the focal point of Geller’s analysis, especially since the author terms his method a “physiognomic epidemiology,” the focus is more about the debates that invoked the body. Through this method, which maps the phonemes and morphemes in common usage about the body throughout the “long nineteenth century,” Geller highlights how these words became the building blocks of such varied identification. The individuals in Geller’s book would have to deal with the long-held and evolving discourses, not just on the “Jewish Question,” but on the “Other Jewish Question,” that of Jews’ “intrinsic essence” (p. 6).

Geller’s journey starts with interpretations of Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza’s “Testament” and the interpolation of circumcision and *effoeminarent* (feminization) as ei-
ther “focusing lens or distorting mirror” (p. 35). This Janus-faced interpretive device became intertwined with the evolving discussion in German society about the link between virility and nationalism. As seen in chapter 3, this was also wrapped within a discussion about disease and the “truth” of the biological corpus. In each chapter, the idea of manliness, and the perceived lack thereof for Jews, drove the idea that Jews were threats to the body—German society. However, the notion that Jews lack manliness could also be interpreted to claim the exact opposite—that Jews were manly and virile. That Jews—like Leo Strauss—used Spinoza in such an affirming way, as Geller argues, shows how pervasive the idea of a feminine male Jewry was.

The next journey in the Other Jewish Question shows how discussions about Orientals intertwined with those about Jews and how these centered around the morpheme Zopf (queue). Just as the Chinese pigtail (Chinesenzopf—their braided hair) identified them, so the Judenzopf (plica polonica—the vermin-infested disfigured head) identified Jews. The Judenzopf could substitute for circumcision, as this signifier was not viewable whereas the Zopf was. This association was not newly “discovered,” but had a long history. Thus anti-Jewish writers had easy access to its imagery and its power of association, but not only them. Even those whose associations with Judaism and Jewry are complicated—like Heinrich Heine—drew on these terms to differentiate between Jew and non-Jew, German Jew and Polish Jew.

Just as Heine used these associations, Rahel Levin Varnhagen also had no choice but to adopt the imagery surrounding the male Jew even though she was female. In many ways, this drives home Geller’s point about the pervasiveness of the discourse about circumcision. As he writes, the “imagined scar of circumcision could not be removed” (p. 139). It was a scar that could not be overcome by Bildung (formation of the individual); conversion; or in the case of Levin Varnhagen, intermarriage and changing her name. Inevitably, Levin Varnhagen would always be seen as the parvenu, a bad copy, yet another trope that was common in anti-Jewish discourse throughout the modern era. While Jews were expected to attain Bildung during this period—indeed, it was part of the “quid pro quo of rights for regeneration”[1]—they would, as seen by the example of Levin Varnhagen, never be accepted as full individuals like their Christian counterparts.

After journeying through Levin Varnhagen’s life, Geller then moves to Ludwig Feuerbach and looks at discourses surrounding eating. This discussion primarily hinges on the centrality of eating in Feuerbach’s view of humanity. Coined in 1850 as “you are what you eat,” its associations with Jews disappeared from his later works. It is not as though Feuerbach was cooking his Brotstudium (studying to “earn his bread”; for Feuerbach this meant Jews not rising above the study of theology) from an empty pot—he was able to add ingredients from a readily available pantry, including the old Roman association of Jews eating garlic and emanating a foetor Judiacus (Jewish stench); a later view of kashrut (kosher) laws that showed a lack of commensality; and the most heinous association of them all—the “Blood Libel,” which postulated that Jews used the blood of Christian children to make Passover matzot (matzah). Such associations would follow Jews throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, playing an important role in debates about Jewish emancipation and integration, and they appear and reappear throughout Geller’s study.

It only follows that once Geller finishes his discussion of Brotstudium and Feuerbach that he moves to Feuerbach’s most (in)famous pupil—Karl Marx. It should come as no surprise that in Marx’s world anti-Semitic tropes abounded, since he drew on the works of Feuerbach and Bernadino Ramazzini, among others, who depicted Jews negatively. This chapter focuses on the morpheme Lump, which translates as rags, but can also be associated with the following derivative words: rascal/scoundrel (Lump), riffraff (Lumpengesindel), and contemptible or slovenly/implicitly immoral matters (Lumperei). Also tied with Lump is the morpheme Verkehr (exchange/traffic). These two words worked together within Marx’s world and Marx’s works, and their connections to Jewry provided an easy way for him to describe the ills of industrial capitalism and modernity.

After looking at Marx’s journey through rags and exchange, Geller then examines the complexities of a pre-Zionist Max Nordau, who sought to espouse both a European identity and Darwinist ideology. As suggested by Geller, Nordau sought to distance himself from the depictions of Jews by anti-Semites, yet what Nordau may have done instead was tie many of those strands together. We see this in Nordau’s use of the clinical term “leprosy” (Mieselsucht), a word whose phoneme Miesel- can also be called a “little mouse,” or Mauschuschen; this association then ties to Yiddish, a language derogatorily referred to as Mauscheldutsch—which, according to Nordau, was a degenerate form of German (p. 223). Perhaps most illuminating in this chapter is Geller’s discussion of Nordau’s
“etc.” (p. 227), in which he refuses to mention circumcision; rather, Nordau sought to create a Jewry of externalities that could be eschewed to achieve assimilation, yet the “etc.” gives away that which he sought to hide.

The last two chapters complete Geller’s tour by bringing us through the early twentieth century. First, Geller introduces us to the Dresden State Superior Court’s chief judge and self-acclaimed paranoiac, Daniel Paul Schreber. Like several other figures in this book, Schreber was not Jewish, yet in his delusions his body was inscribed as an “unmanned, non-Jewish Eternal Jew” (p. 235). Those discourses included the tropes of diseased sexuality and syphilis, which turned Jews into a ubiquitous group that threatened the whole. That Schreber also invoked prostitution in this case was, as Geller notes, not surprising, as syphilis was connected to the sex trade, just as Jews were seen as important facilitators of this trade. Perhaps less so than other chapters, Geller is not as confident in his conclusions and his associations, writing: “Schreber’s hallucinated body may well have been constructed by the Judenstum-associated discourses of syphilology and syphilophobia” (p. 255, emphasis added). Despite the hedging of such assertions, Geller’s analysis in this chapter, like other chapters, brings readers easily to his view, through close textual evidence and well-written prose.

In the last chapter, Geller looks at the writings of Walter Benjamin, tracing the morphemes “Mimesis” and “Aura” through this important theorist’s and others’ writings, and trying to see how Benjamin identified with Jewishness through his writings. Mimesis forms a significant core of this chapter, and this term was associated as a Jewish talent and contributed to a view of Jews as “womanlike and immoral” (p. 265), in many ways similar to the parvenu, yet far worse, as those Jews who mimicked Germans not only were rejected as “Germans,” but were also loathed. Aura likewise informs Geller’s analysis, especially in the association of aura with olfaction. Benjamin’s works, as noted, had a fond memory of pleasant childhood smells, yet these emanations are turned on their head to represent a foetor Judaicus that serves for anti-Semites, including Adolf Hitler, as proof of Jews’ degenerate status. Benjamin’s attempts to break away from his opponent’s views are similar to Jews’ attempts to do so throughout Geller’s book. Many of these writers were indeed “vulnerable to legitimating the views of oppressor and to yielding to self-hatred” (p. 301), yet all had no alternative but to use the discourses available to them and try to use them in a disempowering fashion, trying their best to strip them of their suggestive enmities.

While Geller has done a masterful job in analyzing this diverse collection of texts, part of the trouble in providing an appropriate review for this book is the density of information and the expansiveness of the project. One need only look at the copious and illustrative footnotes (over one hundred pages!) and bibliography to see the diversity. I am not alone in noting this.[2] Each chapter has multiple arguments to which a review cannot do justice; unpacking each assertion is beyond this mandate. Yet I do not believe that this project could necessarily be any shorter—each vignette (and mini-excursus) is well placed within the narrative and adds an essential layer of complexity. By understanding the discourses within which each writer was constrained allows us to gain a fuller appreciation for the social, political, intellectual, and existential world in which German Jews and “other” Germans lived.

In addition to my minor criticism of the book’s density, a more substantive critique of this book is, in fact, one of its strengths: the focus on important individuals—Jewish, non-Jewish, and apostate—who used these physiognomic classifications and tropes within their writings and self- and ascribed-identifications. While it certainly is worthwhile to see how these tropes circumscribed and shaped the discourses within high culture and those of important individuals, including those mentioned above and other infamous figures, such as Achim von Arnim and Heine, I wonder how these discourses infiltrated the local level, at the operative level of individual acts of anti-Semitism. One example I can give would fit into Geller’s fantastic “alimentary” analysis and the supposed lack of commensality of Jews in the German states. In 1846, when arguing in the local Constance newspapers for their admission to the city, Jews asserted that their habits were not, in fact, the reason for separation. Jews could easily partake in the brotherhood of Germans while keeping their unique culinary habits—in this case, eating garlic sausage and drinking juice. Does this profession of commensality and proclamation of brotherhood prove that Geller’s thesis operates on a much broader basis? In many ways, that Jews were using the language of their oppressors—and the resultant broader rejection of Jews in German society—would seem to support such an assertion. Yet the Constance story shows us the eventual example of a success. They were admitted to Constance by the city council in 1847. I would go as far to say that this example may prove something more: that Jews were able to successfully use these tropes in a “reverse Oriental gaze,” turning the discourse of hate and methods of exclusion for their own aims, such as emptying the power of

3
such tropes, and then turning the language back against their oppressors.[3] What would we find out if we put more local events and discussions underneath Geller’s lens?

In the end, this book will be a welcome addition to any class on Jewish identity and Jewish life in Europe. While it will be very difficult for undergraduates to understand the complexities of each individual argument, the general themes throughout Geller’s book, especially the notion that our ideas and writings are influenced by the available discourses in our own times, need to be brought to the fore, along with the idea that anti-Semitic tropes have readily been available for anti-Semites of each generation to draw on. They did not necessarily need to create new ones, they could just adapt and graft new ideas onto the old, very much an episperm of its own. Furthermore, this analysis shows how anti-Semitism was much more than just a racial category; it was an all-encompassing ideology that sought out new interpretations to keep Jews from both overcoming their other successes and identifying themselves as something other than Jewish.

Notes


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic


URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32399

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.