



Shai Ginsburg, Martin Land, Jonathan Boyarin, eds. *Jews and the Ends of Theory*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2019. viii + 328 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8232-8199-2.

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This intriguing volume collects a wide array of essays that are held together by the common thread of how the figure of “the Jew” is inscribed in the ephemeral notion of “theory” and how this figure upends binary distinctions and unearths different meanings from familiar concepts found throughout Jewish intellectual history and philosophy. By combining personal reflection with academic treatise and taking a cue from intellectual history, comparative literature, and philosophy, the volume inspects a myriad of aspects: language and translation; the state and violence; the political and theological; the ancient and modern; and the past, present, and future. New air is breathed on these big issues—as the editors argue in their introduction—by approaching them from the margins, where “the figure of the Jew” has long been positioned (p. 2). The distinctive roster of authors manages to accomplish this, each in their own way.

In their illuminative introduction (itself a highly sophisticated short essay and research agenda) on “Jews,” theory, and spectral reading, the three editors invoke Critical Theory (writ large) and the Frankfurt school as a historical and theoretical starting point, moving from there to a new approach called “spectral reading,” which seeks to find the figure of “the Jew” or “the Jewish” in texts and theories that are often understood as (almost) non-Jewish (p. 3). At the same time, the editors

want to preserve (or revive) the critical edge of theory, and further, to suggest that highlighting this somewhat undefined Jewishness will accomplish exactly that. They acknowledge that “theory” and “critical theory” are often used interchangeably nowadays, and this is apparent throughout the volume. What remains of Critical Theory can be boiled down to the following: deploying theory critically means using it “oppositional[y], in relation to traditional theory as well as to hegemonic cultural and political establishments” (p. 2). This is a rather flat definition given that Critical Theory in the sense of the Frankfurt school had a more precise (that is, sharper) goal, namely, to criticize “bourgeois science” (bürgerliche Wissenschaft), or bourgeois-capitalist society, mostly through Marxist and Freudian insights. That was obviously a long time ago. Critical Theory became critical theory and then theory, moved from the old world to the new, and took its long, substantive-filled sentences with it. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer became unfashionable and again fashionable, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault filled the void and stayed, and now the “critical” oppositional gist of critical theory inhales its stimulus freely, including from Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger. What a journey.

What remained, then, is the oppositional role, as the editors write. As one progresses through the

volume, it is notable that the essays contained within are so diverse in form and content that their ascribed oppositional role varies immensely (which certainly makes for a very refreshing and exciting read because one never knows what to expect from the next chapter). Theory along its journey has lost its contours, but it has also diversified and not necessarily to its creative disadvantages. These essays certainly succeed in raising important theoretical issues; even so, the search for a common denominator is a bit more difficult. In addition to the one the editors suggest (spectral reading), I would like to offer my own suggestion, which I take from one of the essays in this volume. Before that, I want to review, in quick succession, the essays contained herein, which speak to many different audiences and therefore deserve individual mentions.

Fittingly, the volume begins with an essay on the Jewish roots of the Frankfurt school. Martin Jay's enthralling essay on the intellectual development of Leo Lowenthal assesses his role in the Weimar Jewish Renaissance. From his affiliation with the circle around Rabbi Nehemia Anton Nobel, a towering yet somehow idiosyncratic figure who attracted many followers before his early death in 1922, to his ventures into Zionism and psychoanalysis, and ultimately to his membership in the Institute for Social Research, the institutional vehicle of the Frankfurt school, Jay follows Lowenthal's "Jewish impulses" to argue for his inclusion into (or against his exclusion from) a secular Jewish tradition that Jay connects to the historical foundation of Critical Theory (p. 37).

Next is Yehouda Shenhav's essay, which offers a meditation on the Palestinian Nakba and the expulsion of Jews from Arab countries after 1948. It is a poignant and personal essay that raises many questions around language (Hebrew and Arabic), translation, and sovereignty, forcefully arguing against the suppression of Arabic and Arabic-Jewish culture and language in Israeli discourse. In his piece, "The End of Ladino," Andrew Bush follows

Derrida (or more precisely, the potential of a footnote in Derrida's *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre* from 1996) toward a critique of—what he calls—the "Ashkenazi-centric articulation of Jewish places and the place of Jews" and pushes for awareness of the continuity of the Sephardic experience and Ladino as a language of choice in intellectual history and philosophy (p. 68).

Sarah Hammerschlag reassess the relationship between Emmanuel Levinas and Derrida along the lines of two anecdotes, which contrast their respective relationship to Judaism. This triangle of Levinas-Judaism-Derrida is held together and disrupted by irony. Irony, with its oscillation between fidelity and betrayal, was used by Levinas and Derrida in opposite ways: by Levinas as a tool for communal cohesion and by Derrida to escape from communal grip. Through this juxtaposition of their respective usage of irony, Hammerschlag revalues Levinas's and Derrida's role as Jewish intellectuals and their respective view of Judaism.

Sergey Dolgopolski invokes in his essay Carl Schmitt, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger, and the Babylonian Talmud (among others) to investigate the representation of the figure of "the Jew" in the "human being," thus the *representation of the representation* (a notion taken from Schmitt). Dolgopolski counters this representation with the Talmudic notion of the refutation of the refutation. The result is a wide-ranging inquiry into a counter-genealogy of the political. Jay Geller also investigates a figure, namely, that of "the Jew," as an animal. Via Derrida, providing the theoretical foundation, and Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* (1915) and *Ein Bericht für eine Akademie* (1917)—both explorations of the practical ramifications of this figure—Geller uses the human-(nonhuman) animal divide to illuminate the Jewish-Gentile divide in nineteenth- and twentieth-century central Europe and focuses on the identification of a Jewish minority, in a Gentile majoritarian society, as animals (that is, nonhumans) and, through animals, as different.

Svetlana Boym's essay examines the lives of Victor Shklovsky and Osip Mandelshtam, branding them as offshoots of the off-modern tradition, a zigzag between political and artistic engagement, in which theory and praxis mix, in which familiarisms are rejected in favor of a free way of thinking and acting. Arendt's notion of "passionate thinking" is invoked to describe the off-modern style, which borrows freely from wherever its passion takes it, unfazed by the demands of systematic considerations and the beguiling security of internal coherence. In his fascinating contribution, James I. Porter examines Erich Auerbach's Jewish philology, which traces the journey of historical thinking in the West from the Binding of Isaac, to Dante, and to modernity and the secularization process, thus arguing for the continuing relevance of the Hebrew Bible for our way of thinking.

Hannan Hever revisits the debate between Gershon Scholem and Martin Buber about Hasidism (and Kabbala and Sabbateanism) by looking at their views on Jewish sovereignty and Zionism as a clash between a covert Schmittian (Scholem) and an anti-Schmittian (Buber). This allows Hever to link their respective views of the State of Israel to their dispute about Hasidism and to lay bare how behind this scholarly discussion lurked political stakes that even Buber and Scholem could only understand in hindsight. Martin Land, in the contribution most directly addressing the theme of the volume, investigates the link between theory and the figure of "the Jew" and the reasons why it has weakened in recent decades; his answer to this question lies in the move of the Jewish minority from the margins to the center of society. He ends his meandering essay with a passionate call for the relevance of Critical Theory and the Frankfurt school.

The volume closes with Elliot R. Wolfson's dense essay on what it means to think about the beginning and the end. In his philosophical expositions, Wolfson draws a parallel between "Jewish apocalypticism" and Heidegger's understanding of

temporality and finds these parallels corroborated—"ironically," Wolfson writes—in Heidegger's notorious rectoral address *Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität* from 1933, in which he charged the German academy with leading the German Volk toward its national socialist destiny (p. 304). Those of you who find this unnecessarily provocative should take a look at Wolfson's *The Duplicity of Philosophy's Shadow: Heidegger, Nazism, and the Jewish Other* (2018), especially chapter 1, and *Heidegger and Kabbalah: Hidden Gnosis and the Path of Poiesis* (2019), especially chapter 5, for more contextualization of this unsettling juxtaposition.[1]

These short remarks hardly do justice to these essays that are, in most cases, part of larger projects that have occupied the authors' minds for several years. The essays are objects of intense personal preoccupation and, also, intellectual passion, which brings me to my last point. As I mentioned, in their introduction the editors describe the connection between the essays included in the book and an approach called "spectral reading," certainly a neglected dimension worth pursuing. However, I would argue that the essays—as creative and well written as they may be—are connected by an additional notion, one that is brought up not in the introduction but in the essay by Boym. Boym's invocation of Arendt's idea of "passionate thinking," a style of thought that "mediates between philosophy and experience, judging and acting," is also a superb commentary on all of these essays (p. 164). The prevalence of anecdotes, jokes, personal narratives, and philosophical musings, which often serve as starting points for inquiries into theoretical questions, underscores the drive that guides their authors. As this volume argues, the critical aspect of theory is defined not by approach, method, or theoretical fidelity, but by its opposition against. Against what? As one could suspect, and as the authors demonstrate, the answer to this question is most often rooted in one's own personal passion.

Note

[1]. See Martin Kavka, review of *The Duplicity of Philosophy's Shadow: Heidegger, Nazism, and the Jewish Other*, by Elliot R. Wolfson, H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews (March 2019), <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28655/reviews/3904833/kavka-wolfson-duplicity-philosophys-shadow-heidegger-nazism-and>.

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