Recent Developments in German-Jewish Studies (1980–Present)

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Like many other academic subfields, German-Jewish studies has emerged from a range of different methodologies, scholarly disciplines, and general areas of inquiry, making its own contours inherently multidisciplinary and, in terms of basic definition, relatively elusive. It has drawn considerable sustenance from such established fields as history, sociology, political science, and comparative literature, at the same time gaining significantly from various theoretical enterprises, including feminism, Marxism, and cultural studies. Although there does not yet exist a single definitive core curriculum in German-Jewish studies, there are a number of important scholarly institutions (e.g., the Leo Baeck Institute, YIVO Institute, and the combined Center for Jewish History in New York); academic journals that frequently publish work on German-Jewish topics (e.g., *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, *New German Critique*, *History and Memory*); as well as a host of recent book publications, edited anthologies, and single-authored monographs alike, which together have contributed to a discernable turn in German studies over the past two decades.

Before I set out to chronicle these developments, let me present a brief personal tale, an allegory of sorts, with the hope that it may shed some light on the changing status of German-Jewish studies. Not long after beginning my doctoral work in German in the early 1990s, while I was still mulling over prospective dissertation topics, I confided in one of my teachers that I wanted to focus on an area which I had hoped to call "German-Jewish modernism." Although he recognized the intrinsic quality and richness of the texts and debates I wished to examine, he showed great apprehension at the thought of my being labeled a specialist in German-Jewish studies; he insisted, quite candidly, that this might somehow close off opportunities for professional advancement, that it might be perceived as an academic stigma. It was a practical matter, not an ideological one, so he claimed, but it struck me at the time as deeply discouraging. I remained obstinate in my plan, however, and several years later, when I entered the job market, not only were there a number of tenure-track listings that highlighted German-Jewish studies in their description, but the very fact that I had chosen to specialize in this subfield proved, if anything, to be far more of an asset than a liability.

Rabbi Jacob Joseph Oettinger in Berlin, 1840
Courtesy of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York.

Rabbi Gesa S. Ederberg holds a pulpit in Weiden/Oberpfalz and is the director of the office of the German Masorti/Conservative Movement in Berlin.
Photo by Roman Jurowetzki.

Today, over half a decade later, there seems to be no shortage of interest in German-Jewish literary and cultural history in the American academy—both within and outside of departments and programs in German studies. There are regular panels and special sessions at annually held professional meetings; summer seminars sponsored by the Fulbright Commission and the German Academic Exchange Service; national and international academic conferences held at universities and colleges; and finally, publication projects such as special issues of journals and university presses with either a specialized book series or general lists emphasizing this area of research.

Scholarly Pioneers and their Legacy

Until the late 1970s, German-Jewish studies, if there was such a thing, was pursued for the most part by professional historians, either in the pages of the *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* (which began publication in 1953), in the Institute's West-German book series, or in independent monographs. George L. Mosse published his highly influential *Germans and Jews: The Right, the Left, and the Search for a "Third Force" in Pre-Nazi Germany* in 1970. As a professor of German and European history at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, his work in and out of the classroom affected an entire generation of young scholars, including Steven Aschheim, Paul Breines, Anson Rabinbach, and others—many of whom would go on to contribute to the general area of German-Jewish studies.

In the early 1980s, *New German Critique* published three special issues dedicated to "Germans and Jews," selections of which would later be included in the critical anthology *Germans and Jews Since the Holocaust* (1986), edited by Anson Rabinbach and Jack Zipes, two of the journal's founding editors. Like other such volumes (e.g., Jehuda Reinharz and Walter Schatzberg's *The Jewish Response to German Culture: From the Enlightenment to the*

Second World War [1985]), *Germans and Jews* presented work by historians, political theorists, philosophers, and Germanists from the United States and abroad. Alongside contributions by veteran writers and thinkers such as Jean Améry, Toni Oelsner, and Manès Sperber, *Germans and Jews* gave voice to a new generation of critics and scholars, including Atina Grossmann, Moishe Postone, and Martin Jay, the majority of whom were weaned on the staples of the Frankfurt School and the teachings of the American New Left. To be sure, the critical legacy of the Institute of Social Research and its associates has served as an important scholarly emphasis which, though perhaps not fundamentally bound to German-Jewish studies, has left a serious impact on the field at large.

Against a similar backdrop, with the precedent having been set by a handful of senior scholars, mostly historians, and an academic climate increasingly attuned to identity politics and cultural studies, Sander Gilman published his groundbreaking *Jewish Self-Hatred* in 1986. Drawing on a vast assortment of literary and non-literary texts from the past several hundred years, Gilman offered a panoramic account of the diverse and sometimes contradictory dynamics of German-Jewish identity formation. Especially novel in his approach was the sustained attention given to stereotypes, to the perceived Otherness of the Jew, to the key tropes of German-Jewish (as well as Yiddish and American-Jewish) literature, and the various kinds of cultural iconography invoked in such works. Gilman's work on racial stereotyping and cultural Otherness would prove instructive not only for German-Jewish studies, but for cultural studies in general, an area in which the German-Jewish sphere may be seen to figure merely as one among many spheres of inquiry (see Russell Berman's *Cultural Studies of Modern Germany: History, Representation, and Nationhood* [1993]).

Anthologies and New Histories

One of the predominant tendencies in German-Jewish studies has been to bring scholars together to write and rewrite the various strands of the larger history, to ensure that Jewish writers, thinkers, and directors become—or, in some cases, become once again—a part of the German literary and cultural pantheon. The primary examples include Gilman and Karen Remmler's *Reemerging Jewish Culture in Germany: Life and Literature since 1989* (1994); Dagmar C. G. Lorenz and Gabriele Weinberger's *Insiders and Outsiders: Jewish and Gentile Culture in Germany and Austria* (1994); as well as the literary anthologies *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Austria* (1998), edited by Lorenz, and *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Germany* (2002), edited by Leslie Morris and Remmler. A number of recent volumes have attempted to forge new directions in scholarship, both in the period after 1945 (Morris and Zipes's *Unlikely History: The Changing German-Jewish Symbiosis, 1945–2000* [2002]) and before (Michael Brenner and Derek Penslar's *In Search of Jewish Community: Jewish Identities in Germany and Austria, 1918–1933* [1998]). Arguably the most monumental of these studies, both in terms of scope and level of scholarly collaboration, is the 1997 publication of the *Yale Companion to Jewish Writing and Thought in German Culture, 1096–1996*, edited by Gilman and Zipes.

German-Jewish Studies versus Holocaust Studies

The study of the Holocaust has become a popular offering in the college and university curriculum. This has served as a double-edged sword for German-Jewish studies. On the one hand, it has piqued interest among students, scholars, and the general public in German history and culture from 1933 to 1945. On the other hand, it has tended to overshadow that which preceded and followed these years. Put simply, for all too many students (and a disproportionate number of scholars as well), the history of German Jewry would seem to follow a rather straight path toward Auschwitz; as for whatever may have developed after 1945, for such critics, it is of little significance. This is not to say that there has not been solid research on Jewish life during the Third Reich (and Marion Kaplan's work is a strong counterpoint). In the past few years, there have also been important studies of German and German-Jewish writing, poetry, and prose, dealing with the Holocaust and with trauma, more generally.

Among the recent sociological and historical studies are those dealing with the various dilemmas faced by Jews during the successive decades after the war, such as Y. Michal Bodemann's edited volume *Jews, Germans, Memory: Reconstructions of Jewish Life in Germany* (1996), Lynn Rappaport's *Jews in Germany after the Holocaust: Memory, Identity and German-Jewish Relations* (1997), and Michael Brenner's *After the Holocaust: Rebuilding Jewish Lives in Postwar Germany* (1997). In addition to the scholarship predominantly focused on Jewish cultural life in West Germany, there have been studies of German-Jewish culture in former East Germany (e.g., Robin Ostow's *Jews in Contemporary East Germany: The Children of Moses in the Land of Marx* [1989]; and John Bornemann and Jeffrey Peck's *Sojourners: The Return of German Jews and the Question of Identity* [1995]). Finally, a burgeoning area of research has emerged in tandem with the spate of new literature, from short fiction and essays to poetry and novels, written by Jewish authors in both halves of Germany after 1989 (Gilman and Remmler 1994; Gilman, *Jews in Today's German Culture* [1995]; Morris and Remmler 2002) and in contemporary Austria (Lorenz 1998).

It is still too early to predict how this subfield will go on to establish itself as it matures. It does seem plausible, however, that there will remain staples of study—genres, figures, periods, debates, etc.—while the field continues to bring into discussion additional neglected areas of research. Finally, like other subfields, German-Jewish studies will have to adjust to the divergent methodological transformations that take place in its midst, and only then will it be able to keep up with the challenges it continues to face.

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