

MISZELLE

Klaus Hödl

'Jewish history' as part of 'general history': A comment

In a recent issue, Medaon published four intriguing and thought-provoking comments on the question of how Jewish history, also called “history of the ‘others’”, can be integrated into ‘general history’.¹ Despite the fact that the use of the contentious terms ‘Jewish history’ and ‘general history’ would have required more accurate definitions,² the answers provided by these four historians may spark further debates. And such debates are very timely at present, particularly with respect to a growing tendency among intellectuals, politicians, and historians in western societies to endorse inclusive national narratives.³ They are increasingly seen as a means to counter the rise of far-right populism appealing to people who feel abandoned by society and therefore lack a sense of societal belonging. The question of how ‘Jewish history’ can be incorporated in such comprehensive narratives therefore needs to be addressed head-on.

In the following I will outline an approach to writing Jewish history as part of ‘general history’. The four aforementioned scholars have already raised some of the criteria that I will discuss. While my proposal of treating the connection between Jewish and general history builds on some of their arguments, it also differs in one particular aspect: I emphatically turn away from the concept of ‘German-Jewish history’. I have chosen to do so because I think that the most innovative contributions to the study of (European) Jewish history of the recent past, which also – at least implicitly – demonstrate how Jewish history can be understood in the context of general history, stem from research that questions the ‘Germanocentric’ perspective. Two approaches that reject the so-called “German” model in Jewish historiography seem to be particularly relevant to writing a comprehensive historical narrative, as elaborated below.

History from below

Todd M. Endelman, a historian at the University of Michigan/Ann Arbor, addressed the ‘Germanocentric’ emphasis in European Jewish historiography quite bluntly. Since the 1980s, he challenged the view that the *haskalah* had modernized Jewishness in Europe and brought about a crisis among traditional Jews. He argued instead that the many changes in the lives of ordinary Jews, the vast majority of whom lived outside the German states, caused this erosive influence on traditional Jewish life. Endelman approached history “from the bottom up”, i.e. he focused on the lives of ordinary Jewish people, utilizing the tools of social history. In one of his articles he even argued that the life of the

¹ See online: <http://www.medaon.de/de/ausgabe/medaon-11-2017-20/> [16. 12. 2017]

² ‘Jewish history’ is a very contentious term. Basically, there are only ‘(Jewish) histories’, and maybe not ‘Jewish histories’ per se, but ‘histories of Jews’. See Rosman, Moshe: *How Jewish Is Jewish History?*, Oxford 2007, p. 106–107.

³ Lilla, Mark: *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*, New York 2017. Gabriel fordert Kurskorrektur von SPD, online: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/postmoderne-sozialdemokraten-gabriel-fordert-kurskorrektur-von-spd-15343693.html?GEPC=s5> [17. 12. 2017]

London based “Jew’ King, moneylender, womanizer, scoundrel, and radical, was as important to understanding Jewish acculturation and integration as that of Mendelssohn – perhaps even more so, since parvenus and scoundrels outnumbered philosophers in modern Jewish societies”.⁴ Such provocative statements challenged other historians preoccupied with German maskilim and other elite Jews.

Other scholars, such as the Israeli historian Shmuel Feiner, took up Endelman’s invigorating approach. In one of his trailblazing books, Feiner described the process of secularization among Jews in central and western Europe, particularly in London and Amsterdam, from the early 18th century onwards.⁵ Feiner understood Jewish secularization as a major aspect of modernization that found expression not only in the shedding of traditional clothes and the rejection of religious observance, the frequenting of pubs and coffeehouses, the drinking of alcohol in public and dancing, but also in new and more intense forms of socializing with non-Jews. These activities started well before the first stirrings of the *haskalah* and defined part of Jewish everyday life by a growing number of religiously indifferent or defiant Jews. Feiner’s accounts, the result of painstaking research, can only be explained and properly understood in consideration of the wider social and cultural context. They represent exemplary instances of Jewish as part of a general history.

Jewish and non-Jewish interconnectedness

The number of Jews living/residing in London and Amsterdam in the 18th century far exceeded that of any large German city, which makes an investigation of their lives not only expedient, but even advisable. In terms of numbers, a study of the history of eastern European Jews is even more important because they represented the majority of European Jewry. Although many historians dedicated their research to the Jews in Poland and other eastern European countries, it took them a considerable amount of time to free themselves from the paradigms of German Jewish history and focus on the specific eastern European setting.⁶ One of the trailblazers among those historians was Gershon David Hundert, who was followed by scholars such as David Frick, Moshe Rosman, Magda Teter, among others. Even more than the work of Endelman and Feiner, their research dealt with Jewish and non-Jewish encounters at an everyday level. Their findings brought to light close social contacts despite repeated attempts by Church leaders, as well as Jewish authorities, to prohibit/limit such interactions and punish transgressions. Ordinary Jewish and non-Jewish people sang and danced together, visited each other, lived in their respective households, had love affairs and helped each other.⁷ Unsurprisingly, the relations they had with each other were not without tensions. Yet

⁴ Endelman, Todd M.: *The Jews of Britain, 1656 to 2000*, Berkeley 2002, p. 10.

⁵ Feiner, Shmuel: *The Origins of Jewish Secularization in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, Philadelphia 2010.

⁶ The historiography of eastern European Jews has a long tradition. What seems to be largely forgotten nowadays is the fact that the early historiographical works aimed to be integrative narratives. See Teller, Adam/Teter, Magda: Introduction: Borders and Boundaries in the Historiography of the Jews in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, in: Polin 22 (2010), pp. 3–46, here 8–12.

⁷ Teter, Magda: ‘There should be no love between us and them’. Social Life and the Bounds of Jewish and Canon Law in Early Modern Poland, in: Polin 22 (2010), pp. 249–270.

these frictions were mostly the result of diverging interests, economic competition, and mundane concerns rather than ethnic or religious hostility.⁸ Seeking out these manifold encounters between Jews and non-Jews is likely a topic that transcends the boundaries of discrete, isolated historical narratives.

The fear of losing the Jewish and non-Jewish binary

An investigation especially of east European societal conditions also challenges the appropriateness of the use of terms such as 'Jewish minority'⁹ or 'Jewish integration',¹⁰ both of which imply a Jewish/non-Jewish dualism.¹¹ A concept of dualism, however, prevents a comprehensive narrative. Eastern European Jewish experiences thus seem to be an almost ideal case for their inclusion into general historical accounts.

However, such an integrative narrative has yet to be written. The reasons for this omission are manifold. Ultimately it can be attributed to the persistent dichotomous thinking among scholars who, contrary to all their research findings, continue to divide Jews and non-Jews into two mutually exclusive categories. This is due in part to concerns that abandoning it would conflate Jews and non-Jews, erase all traces of Jewish distinctiveness and consequently mark the end of Jewish studies as well as the professional self-understanding of scholars in this field.¹² It is also due to the – seemingly anthropologically determined – difficulty to disengage oneself from dichotomous reasoning.¹³ Whatever the primary reason, historians appear unwilling to abandon the Jewish/non-Jewish dualism.

This tendency is demonstrated by Gershon D. Hundert. His research has yielded results that profoundly challenge the Jewish and non-Jewish divide, but he nevertheless appears to have been reluctant to draw corresponding conclusions in his writings. Supported by the findings of his research, Hundert argues that Jews were never seen as a "corporate entity" in Polish historiography.¹⁴ Therefore it would be incorrect to maintain a – Jewish versus non-Jewish – dichotomous juxtaposition. However, instead of following through on his remarkable findings and rejecting the Jewish and non-Jewish binary, Hundert opts for an essentialized description of Jews in which he stresses their feeling of chosenness as their distinguishing feature.¹⁵

⁸ See Avrutin, Eugene M.: Jewish Neighbourly Relations and Imperial Russian Legal Culture, in: *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 9 (2010) 1, pp. 1–16, here 2.

⁹ Hundert, Gershon David: *The Jews in a Polish Private Town. The Case of Opatów in the Eighteenth Century*, Baltimore 1992, pp. 21 and 235–236.

¹⁰ Dynner, Glenn: *Yankel's Tavern. Jews, Liquor, & Life in the Kingdom of Poland*, Oxford 2014, S. 4–5.

¹¹ Hödl, Klaus: *Zwischen Wienerlied und Der Kleine Kohn. Juden in der Wiener populären Kultur um 1900*, Göttingen 2017.

¹² Bartal, Israel/Ury, Scott: *Between Jews and their Neighbours. Isolation, Confrontation, and Influence in Eastern Europe*, in: *Polin* 24 (2012), pp. 3–30, here 7.

¹³ Gould, Stephen Jay: *Deconstructing the "Science Wars" by Reconstructing an Old Mold*, in: *Science* 287 (2000), pp. 253–255, 257–259 and 261, here 253.

¹⁴ Hundert, Gershon David: *Polish Jewish History*, in: *Modern Judaism* 10 (1990), pp. 259–270, here 260.

¹⁵ Teller, Introduction, 2010, p. 41.

The concept of similarity

A promising way to overcome this deadlock among many historians in Jewish studies is to engage with the methodological approaches and analytical tools used in cultural studies. One of the relatively new concepts developed over the last few years in cultural studies is similarity.¹⁶ It tackles precisely this problem of displacing binaries without simultaneously erasing differences that haunts Jewish studies scholars.¹⁷ Similarity suspends dichotomous categorizations by introducing the category of both-and-one.¹⁸ There are no strict divisions between groups or collectives, yet distinctions remain. These differences are no longer seen as profound and fundamental, but rather as dissimilarities that appear in varying shades.¹⁹

This brief commentary cannot expand on the concept of similarity, but it is meant as a suggestion to demonstrate how the study of Jewish history could be integrated into general history.

Zitiervorschlag Klaus Hödl: 'Jewish history' as part of 'general history': A comment, in: *Medaon – Magazin für jüdisches Leben in Forschung und Bildung*, 12 (2018), 22, S. 1–4, online unter http://www.medaon.de/pdf/medaon_22_hoedl.pdf [dd.mm.yyyy].

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¹⁶ Bhatti, Anil/Kimmich, Dorothee/Koschorke, Albrecht/Schlögl, Rudolf/Wertheimer, Jürgen: Ähnlichkeit: Ein kulturtheoretisches Paradigma, in: *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 36 (2011) 1, pp. 233–247.

¹⁷ Hödl, Klaus: "Jewish History" beyond binary conceptions: Jewish performing musicians in Vienna around 1900, in: *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 16 (2017), pp. 377–394.

¹⁸ Bhatti, Anil, Plurikulturalität. In: Feichtinger, Johannes/Uhl, Heidemarie, eds.: *Habsburg neu denken. Vielfalt und Ambivalenz in Zentraleuropa*. 30 kulturwissenschaftliche Stichworte, Wien 2016, pp. 171–180, here 172.

¹⁹ Koschorke, Albrecht: Valenzen eines postkolonialen Konzepts, in: Bhatti/Kimmich/Koschorke/Schlögl/Wertheimer, *Ähnlichkeit*, 2011, p. 36.