

Conference “Re-Framing American Jewish History and Thought: New Transnational Perspectives” Potsdam / Berlin, 20.–22. Juli 2016¹

Transnationalism is one of the most frequently used terms in recent historiography. Jonathan Sarna, premier historian of American Jewry, described its significance for the field: “A transnational approach would remind us that American Judaism was never ‘an island entirely of itself’, and would help to restore American Judaism to its rightful place within a global universe.”² However, Riv-Ellen Prell, another leading scholar, argues that scholarship on North American Jewry “has been somewhat slow to embrace it.”³ In response to this diagnosis, scholars from outside the U.S. have recently started to investigate interactions between American and other Jewries over time and into the present. This conference brought together scholars from the U.S., Europe, and Israel, in order to further transnational approaches and to offer a more nuanced perspective on the American Jewish experience.

In their introductory lectures, Gary P. Zola (Cincinnati) and Markus Krah (Potsdam) made remarks on how a transnational approach can reframe American Jewish history and thought. Zola offered an agenda for transnational research. Transmigrants, people who passed regions on the way to their destination, as well as cultural connections and aesthetical agency are underexplored topics. In addition, he called for greater efforts to define the methodology: “We need to come at some point to a professional agreement what we exactly mean by using a transnational approach.” Krah explained that among the various disciplines, Jewish Studies, as an interdisciplinary field, would be most suited to engage the American-Jewish experience, as it looks at Jewishness from a perspective of cultural studies. However, for historical, political, and epistemological reasons, North American Jewry has not attracted a lot of attention from Jewish Studies in Europe. American Studies, on the other

¹ Originally published on H-Net, Clio-online (November 19, 2016).

² Jonathan D. Sarna: “Afterword: The Study of American Judaism: A Look Ahead,” in: Dana Evan Kaplan (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism*, Cambridge 2005, pp. 417–421, here p. 420.

³ Riv-Ellen Prell: “Review of Kahn, Ava Fran; Mendelsohn, Adam, eds., *Transnational Traditions: New Perspectives on American Jewish History*,” *H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews* (August, 2015).

hand, once quite interested in American Jewry, shifted its focus some twenty years ago to other ethnic groups, apparently regarding Jews as a less distinct subgroup of the white mainstream.

During the following roundtable discussion, Tobias Brinkmann (University Park, PA) and Eli Lederhendler (Jerusalem) engaged transnationalism as a problematic and tricky term. By taking the case of the “German Jew,” Brinkmann demonstrated the paradox of talking about transnationalism in the 19th century before even a German national state was established. Lederhendler provocatively asked if we are about to re-invent the wheel. Earlier Jewish historiography was always transnational in the sense that scholars knew the tension between political boundaries or even geography. “We have to be cautious not to take the same road we’ve been before,” he concluded. Miriam Rürup (Hamburg) and Cornelia Wilhelm (Munich) approached the topic from the perspective of their own research. As Rürup explained, because of the diasporic self-understanding and various types of networks Jewish history is per se transnational and does not have to be specified explicitly as such. Furthermore, transnationalism is already fostered by the historians’ global search for sources. Similarly, Wilhelm’s research traces immigration, careers and professional roles of German refugee rabbis in the US, who embodied the transnational nature of modern Jewish history.

The first panel discussed three important historiographical issues of the 20th century: Antisemitism, Zionism and Jewish continuity. Richard E. Frankel (Lafayette) pointed out that we cannot fully understand the radicalization of modern antisemitism without linking it to the story of globalization. In the 1880s, Congress introduced quotas for Asian immigration, thus factually barring Chinese from entering the U.S. At the same time East European Jewish immigrants experienced the same prejudices that were projected onto the Chinese: their alleged inability to assimilate; shifty business practices; obsession with money; filth and disease; and their strange attraction to white women. Frankel argued for a comparability of the American resentment of Chinese on the West Coast and Jews on the East Coast. Janice Rothschild Blumberg (Atlanta) discussed the correspondence between Theodor Herzl and Rabbi E. B. M. “Alphabet” Browne in 1897. At a time when Reform Judaism strenuously opposed the “anarchist and socialist” ideas of Zionism, Browne sought becoming the link between Herzl’s concept of Zionism and American Reform. Herzl did, in the end, ignore Browne’s proposed role as middleman

for America. The interrelation between Germanness and life in America also played a role in the presentation by Anton Hieke (Bobbau). In 1851, the New York lodges of B'nai B'rith established the Maimonides Reading Institute and Library, in order to implement the concept of German "Bildung" among Jews in New York. Rather than being merely a tool for the preservation of Germanness, the library was a mediator between German culture and life in America. As Hieke explored, its activities reflected a bi-cultural immigrant society in transition that sought to balance their German and American identities.

What was the mutual impact that European and American Judaism had on each other and on their respective religious environments? The second panel introduced this major question of the conference. Dana Evan Kaplan (Mobile, AL) looked at the development from classical to neo-Reform and the emergence of rival theological camps during the 1950s and 1960s. He argued that Reform theologians were highly influenced by European Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers. Some used European political and social trends to justify their radical breaks with extant theological positions. They turned to Europe as a source for new approaches to spiritual life. Claire Maligot (Paris) investigated Jewish contributions to the Second Vatican Council. The vast majority of the Jewish observers in the deliberations came from the U.S. Maligot argued that not only were American Jewish organizations better organized and connected than European rabbis and agencies, but they also benefited from years of practice, structures and reflections on interfaith dialogue at a local level.

The discussion of European influences, in particular the impact of German-Jewish theology on American-Jewish thought was continued in the third panel. George Y. Kohler (Ramat Gan) introduced Steven Schwarzschild, an American rabbi and philosopher, as a reader of the German-Jewish thinker Hermann Cohen. Because of Schwarzschild's translation, interpretation, and transfer of Cohen into the American Jewish discourse, Cohen's thought influenced Reform Judaism. Moreover, Schwarzschild worked transnationally by presenting his European take in American research journals and by contributing an English introduction to the German edition of Cohen's work. Hans-Michael Haußig (Potsdam) claimed that transnational experiences also influenced one of the most important American Jewish theologians, Abraham Joshua Heschel. As a student in Berlin, Heschel became familiar with contemporary approaches to religion among Christian theologians and in the humanities. He developed his own position to the study of religion, mostly influenced

by the German phenomenological school. Philipp von Wussow (Frankfurt am Main) focused on the German-Jewish emigré scholar Leo Strauss. On the one hand Strauss established within the American academy a style of German *Gelehrsamkeit*, on the other he modified his project in the new educational and political situation. Wussow placed scholarship on Strauss' hypermodern reading praxis and its impact on American scholars into the larger picture of German-Jewish intellectual migration in the 1930s and 1940s.

The fourth panel moved the conference back to history. Daniel Soyer (New York) investigated how events in the Soviet Union influenced local politics in New York during World War II. As the city's largest ethnic minority Jews played an important role, in particular on the electoral left and through the American Labor Party. Soyer convincingly demonstrated that even local politics cannot be understood without the transnational context. The presentation by Constance Pâris de Bollardière (Paris) focused on the Bund, a political party with roots in Russia. She demonstrated that although integrated, American Bundists remained close to their roots and to European events until the late 1950s. In immediate postwar France they started a relief and reconstruction program to maintain Yiddish cultural life and socialist ideas. Connections through shared place of origin and identity played an important role in maintaining these trans-diasporic relations. Sonja K. Pilz (Potsdam) compared American and German *Yizkor* prayers commemorating Jewish communities destroyed in the Holocaust. Pilz examined radical differences in their social construction, choice of language and perception of the Shoah. As she argued, the immediate communal settings and the broader cultural background of the prayers provide a more nuanced understanding of social and religious identities associated with them.

The keynote by Michael A. Meyer (Cincinnati) analyzed how Jews regarded their place of origin following their arrival in the US. Meyer compared six waves of migration to demonstrate that within the Jewish transnational experience no group was homogenous in how it related to its respective past. For Sephardic immigrants of the 17th and 18th centuries, the past of "glorious" London and "great" Amsterdam retained a powerful sense of attraction. In the next wave, some German Jews in the 19th century regarded their old home as a land of non-freedom, while others looked back with nostalgia even if they succeeded economically in the US. Often language, family ties, and news of political events across the borders provided a continuity that made the uprooting

fear less traumatic. For example, *landsmanshaftn* offered East European Jews mutual support and a surrogate home. Refugees from Nazi-Germany faced a different situation as they could not think about a return. However, some turned inward and created a cocoon preserving a "Weimar culture," Soviet immigrants shared a "love-hate" relationship to the old home, as they missed the state fraternalism. Recent immigrants from Israel form a category by itself, as they left a state governed by Jews to live voluntarily in the diaspora. However, as Meyer concluded, one overarching commonality can be established: "It was never possible to leave the old country without looking back."

The last panel of the conference analyzed cultural expressions of the transnational American Jewish experience. Cristina Spinei (Iasi) focused on Sholem Aleichem's writings which responded to both the calamities of the shtetl and individual survival in the new American scenery. Tensions of modernity and tradition, assimilation and gradual loss of Jewish identity marked his ambivalent picture of America. As Spinei argued, these contradictory moments point to the author's displacement from the shtetl and growing alienation from Jewish tradition through the encounter of other Jewries. Klara Szlezak (Passau) showed that Russian-born anthropologist Maurice Fishberg's 1911 book "The Jews" on the Jewish diaspora clearly grew out of an American context. In reference to the growing influence of social science using photography as a tool, Fishberg intended to prove that characteristics of worldwide Jewry derived from environmental and social influences rather than essential racial traits. However, as Szlezak argued, this study heavily drew on the very medium that fostered racial stereotypes in an era of Jewish mass migration. By comparing post-Soviet Jewish literature in the US and Germany Jesper Reddig (Münster) investigated different cultural imaginaries. The trope of a "nation of immigrants" defines American self-understanding. Germany, on the other hand, is historically downplaying ethno-cultural diversity. Reddig argued that such recent authors as Yelena Akhtiorskaya (in New York) and Olga Grjasnowa (in Berlin) are forging critical interventions and write back to their predecessors' approaches and the literature of "migration" and "multiculturalism." Lars-Frederik Bockmann (Berlin) examined how the American Jewish writer Michael Chabon connects structures of Jewish memory with popular forms of serial narration, like detective fiction or film noir. In contrast to the dominant reading as trauma and Holocaust representation, Bockmann saw the genre elements as structural components in the creation of cultural memory.

Therefore, Chabon's writing rediscovers and reinterprets specific medial objects of American popular culture as transnational Jewish memory traces.

A concluding presentation by Zola discussed overarching questions arising from a transnational approach in the writing of American Jewry's history. He made clear that academic collaboration between American and non-American scholars in conferences, research or publication partnerships strengthen a deeper understanding of American Jewry's place in general Jewish history. Although Jewish history and thought are of global concern, distinctive characteristics of individual communities should be acknowledged, without uncritically affirming an ideological American-Jewish exceptionalism.

Although this conference was not the bedrock of a "transnational turn" in the study of American Jewry, and despite the initial voices of cautiousness, the panelists opened rich perspectives to the general discussion on the value of transnational approaches in historiography. This will hopefully inspire and engage more scholars to cross the boundaries of countries, cultures and academic discourses.

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