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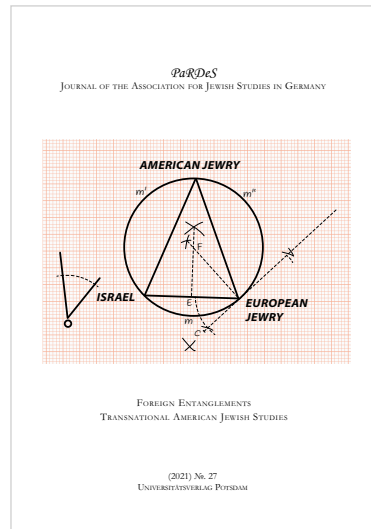
### Foreign Entanglements: Transnational American Jewish Studies

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**Daniel B. Schwartz, *Ghetto: The History of a Word* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 288 p., \$ 35.00.**

In this monograph, Daniel B. Schwartz traces the peregrinations of the word “ghetto” through a multitude of contexts ranging from early modern Italy, where the term was coined in Venice in 1516, through Germany and Eastern Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to contemporary America. He provides a very broad and overall very convincing range of examples, how “ghetto” was used in various contexts and debates, and how the meaning assigned to the word shifted over the course of time.

After the introduction, he divides his study into five chapters dealing with different episodes and contexts: Early Modern Italy, the term’s transformation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, early American debates before 1918, the German occupation of Eastern Europe during the Second World War, and the discussions in the postwar United States. In his conclusion, he adds a short side note on the use of “ghetto” in the context of the Israeli-Palestine conflicts after 1948.

Five main chapters are all about the same length, about 40 pages each, and the notes appear after the text (pp. 205–239). There is a very well-edited index, which covers not only places and persons, but a broad range of subjects as well. This subject index is all the more important, as it brings the various connotations of “ghetto” together and highlights discursive traditions that might get lost in reading the multitude of examples given in the chapters.

In the introduction, Schwartz writes about the difficulties in defining “ghetto” by referring to descriptive as well as prescriptive (normative) approaches. Even the most common connotations, such as compulsion, homogeneity, spatial segregation, immobility, and socioeconomic deprivation, do not always appear together. 19<sup>th</sup> century debates have added a temporal dimension: “ghetto” as a symbol of the “old” Jewish life before emancipation; and the migration of the word to America has even loosened the ties to the Jewish experience. This sets the frame for the central question of the book: why has the term become so seminal (p. 6)?

Chapter 1 reviews the early modern Italian experience. Based on Benjamin Ravid’s definition of the early modern ghetto as “legally mandatory, exclusively Jewish and physically cordoned off via gates and walls” (p. 13) the author argues for a clear distinction between Jewish quarters and ghettos and discusses examples from Venice, Rome, and Florence. Nevertheless, Schwartz

shows that even in those times “ghetto” was more than a technical term. His remarks on the Jewish appropriation of “ghet” (as spelled in Rome) by equating the term with the Hebrew for a bill of divorce (“get”) are inspiring. The sources he presents in this part prove that the debates on the metaphorical level of the word, and thus the way “[f]rom Geographical Realia to Historiographical Symbol”<sup>1</sup>, began well before Emancipation.

“The Nineteenth Century transformation of the Ghetto” is discussed in Chapter 2. After the French Revolution, compulsory areas of Jewish settlement were dismantled, but the term continued to play a vital role in Jewish debates. Schwartz traces the word on its journey to north-alpine Europe through encyclopedias, the so-called “ghetto literature” and journalistic works, mostly in the German-language realm. Again referring to Ravid, he views “ghetto” as more than a word with multiple connotations even in this period, but still defines it as a place – even though “ghetto” writers of that time placed it in rural settings and emphasized the temporal dimension. The chapter also discusses the prolonged process of emancipation in Italy – the ghetto of Rome ended only in 1870 – and deals with early American discussions, in which “ghetto” became “[o]nce again, a physical place in the big city” (p. 85). To Schwartz, the link between “ghetto” as a term and a physical place is essential, and thus the transalpine debates of the 19<sup>th</sup> century appear to be problematic to his argument. Moreover, the author neglects recent publications on the spatial dimensions of Jewish history, which also cover the topic of this chapter.<sup>2</sup>

Chapter 3 follows the US-American debates at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Here, Schwartz skillfully collects a wide range of mostly journalistic sources and shows, how immigrants familiar with Eastern European Jewish life redefined the term to match conditions in US cities. Based on a great variety of sources, Schwartz convincingly works out the importance of “ghetto” for the self-positioning of Jewish migrants. This part is the most innovative part of the book. Debates on the density of Jewish settlements and the prospects of assimilation or the question of why a quarter inhabited exclusively by

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin C. I. Ravid, “From Geographical Realia to Historiographical Symbol: The Odyssey of the Word Ghetto” in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. David B. Ruderman (New York: New York University Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Simone Lässig and Miriam Rürup, eds., *Space and Spatiality in Modern German-Jewish History* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2017); Alina Gromova, Felix Heinert, and Sebastian Voigt, eds., *Jewish and non-Jewish Spaces in Urban Context* (Berlin: Neofelis, 2015).

Christians could not be a ghetto, shed an interesting light on the reconceptualization of “ghetto” in a migration society. The chapter sometimes lacks some distance to the descriptions in the quoted sources, especially when it comes to accounts from travelers. Was the equation of the Jewish quarter in Paris with poverty and dirt (p. 107–108) really rooted in observation, or is it rather a literary topic? Schwartz gives little attention to the narrative strategies of the authors he quotes, which leads to the impression that the changes in terminology just happened.

In the fourth chapter, the author returns to Europe to discuss the impact of Nazi Germany on the “ghetto” debates. He starts his observations in the early days of the NS-regime and convincingly relates how the exclusionary German politics led to an intensification of the debates among German Jews. Briefly he touches on anti-Semitism in Poland and Hungary (p. 130–132); more attention is given to voices in the USA discussing “ghetto” as a “Jewish space” (p. 132–137). On the politics of ghettoization in the German occupied territories, Schwartz confirms the findings of Dan Michman<sup>3</sup> and adds an important perspective by tracing Jewish voices from within the ghetto walls.

Chapter 5 turns the attention to post WWII-USA, where the motif of “ghetto” as a compulsory area of settlement now focused on the black population. Describing the debates on the “black ghetto” and the role of racism in perpetuating the ghetto, Schwartz convincingly analyzes the narrative strategies and the processes of borrowing arguments among the authors.

The book presents the changes and changeability of “ghetto” in the course of half a millennium. Throughout his work, the author presents a kaleidoscope of different voices on “ghetto”; every page turns the reader’s attention to yet another facet, using sources and research literature in English, Italian, French, German, Yiddish and Hebrew. His narrative is strongest when he describes “ghetto” as a place of compulsory settlement. In chapters 1, 4 and 5, he draws fascinating pictures of the interplay between compulsion from the non-Jewish society and appropriation by the inhabitants. When dealing with periods in which the connection between term and place loosens, in chapters 2 and 3, he needs to argue differently. In chapter 3 Schwartz builds his argument around the notion of ghetto as an element of metropolitan urbanity. The short remarks

<sup>3</sup> Dan Michman, *The Emergence of Jewish Ghettos During the Holocaust* (Cambridge/Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

on 19<sup>th</sup> century transalpine Europe in chapter 2 undervalue the importance of these debates. The variety of connotations to which Schwartz refers in his introduction develops in these discussions. Schwartz himself underlines how American Jewish authors in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century drew upon their European experiences, but it was not the places, it was the discourse that shaped their views. Thus, a stronger focus could have been devoted to the fact that “ghetto” was and is always “man-made”. Politicians, writers, journalists, historians – they all produce and reproduce “ghetto”.

Schwartz’ rich presentation of voices and reflections on “ghetto” provides an insight to the multitude of its contexts. It shows the importance of the term over centuries and continents. However, in this book all too often “ghetto” appears foremost as a place, as something that just “is” and has to be analyzed or dealt with. Future studies can rely on Schwartz’ history of the word to study the human factor in the creation and recreation of “ghetto”. This book constitutes a fundamental reference for those efforts.

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