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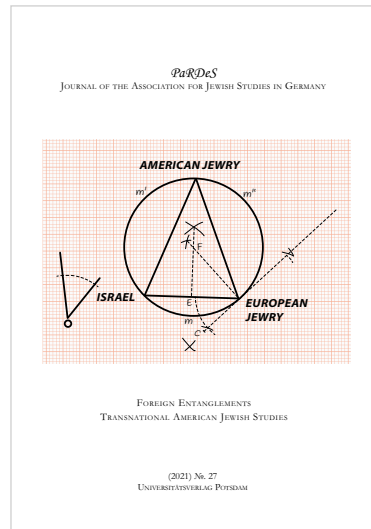
### Foreign Entanglements: Transnational American Jewish Studies

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# Foreign Entanglements: Transnational American Jewish Studies

*by Hasia Diner and Markus Krahl*

This issue of PaRDeS points to the still largely untapped potential of transnational approaches to American Jewish history and to modern Jewish history more broadly.<sup>1</sup> It offers a very small number of incidents or examples which show how the history of the Jews of the United States unfolded in a transnational context, a dynamic universe in which people, ideas, institutions, and texts circulated across nation state borders. While the articles take the Jews of the United States as the focal point or initial subject, they show how their lives involved connections to other places across the globe – how American Jews constructed their Jewish lives entangled with issues and ideas and concerns of Jews elsewhere. These entanglements transcended not just political boundaries such as borders between countries (or within countries), but went beyond the nation state as the prime category shaping Jewish lives and as the dominant organizing principle of Jewish historiography.

The contributors offer case studies of their current research that all look at these multiple connections of American Jewry with other Jewries. Most of the pieces here take a particular focus on the Jews of the German-speaking lands, but that reflects merely the fact that one of the editors operates in a German university and the other in an American one, and as such, they tapped into the scholars in their own specific orbits. Similar volumes could link other places around the Jewish world to each other and they, like this one, would show that for Jews, living in one place did not mean inhabiting a hermetically sealed locale; rather much of their personal and communal lives reflected the constant

<sup>1</sup> “America” in this context and the entire issue of the journal stands in as a shorthand for the United States, with the understanding that transnational approaches in particular call for greater awareness of the importance of US Jewish entanglements with other Jewries in the Americas.

back and forth movements across borders – of bodies, concepts, texts, and political concerns.

The works of these scholars on these specific subjects not only tell important histories but also point to the rich field of analysis waiting to be ploughed. They suggest by example that other historians of the Jews ought to take up the transnational approach as they delve into their own subjects.

We as the editors made no effort to impose a uniform definition of transnationalism, but rather encouraged our authors to take the concept and use it to think about the Jewish women and men whom they study. We did this in large measure because we recognize not only the fluid nature of the concept but also its centrality to all historical research, not just the study of American Jews. The historical profession for several decades has turned its attention to transnational connections as a way to understand the past, and we certainly consider that Jewish history should enter into this now standard historic paradigm.<sup>2</sup>

We also contend that Jewish history offers a particularly rich canvas upon which to think about transnationalism. For millennia, Jews have migrated from place to place. Their migrations spread Jewish populations to multiple settings, with individuals and families making different choices as to destination. For these thousands of years, Jews have maintained connections, whether through family, trade, religious practice, texts, or politics, not only to the places they had left but also to their coreligionists who went to other new homes. As such, Jewish history provides a robust context for thinking about transnationalism.

<sup>2</sup> There is a plethora of works advancing parallel and sometimes competing understandings of transnationalism itself and its relations to other recent historiographical phenomena, such as post-colonialism, global history, diasporic history, connected histories, *histoire croisée*/entangled histories, history of transfers, etc. The most pertinent works in these fields include Dipresh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2000); Matthias Middell, *Cultural Transfers, Encounters and Connections in the Global 18th Century* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2014); Shalini Randeria, “Entangled Histories of Uneven Modernities: Civil Society, Caste Solidarities and the Post-Colonial State in India,” in *Unraveling Ties: From Social Cohesion to New Practices of Connectedness*, ed. Yehuda Elkana, Ivan Krastev, Elisio Macamo, and Shalini Randeria (Frankfurt/New York: Campus/St. Martin’s Press 2002), 284–311; Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, “Beyond Comparison: Histoire Croisée and the Challenge of Reflexivity,” *History and Theory* 45 (February 2006): 30–50. For an overview of the development of the concept of transnationalism (with a focus on European history), cf. Klaus Kiran Patel, “Transnational History,” *EGO: European History Online* (2013), accessed October 15, 2021, <http://ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/theories-and-methods/transnational-history>.

We recognize likewise that no one definition could possibly contain the dynamism of the construct of transnationalism and its multiple and varied implications for thinking about the past. Historians do not, and have no need, to converge on a single standard by which to measure and analyze transnationalism. It played itself out in so many ways as to be everywhere and therefore it allows for many different, sometimes conflicting, interpretations and uses by scholars. Our view has been that each of these can illuminate the basic contention here that the experiences of the Jews in the United States, the premier migration destination in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries for European Jews and the largest, freest, wealthiest, and most institutionally plastic Jewish population center in the world by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, provides a particularly fine lens through which to search out the ways that borders did not mean a severing of connections. Those connections persisted in multiple ways and these articles provide a few suggestive examples.

The projects reflected in the articles in this volume range from 19<sup>th</sup>-century physical mobility back and forth between Russia and California to the transnational dimensions of interreligious and legal dialogues in the post-1945 period. As just three examples of what unfolds in these pages, these pieces make clear that living in one place, the United States, did not limit Jewish options and self-definitions. They demonstrate how Jews in the United States lived in a multi-nodal Jewish world, and what happened to Jews elsewhere impacted them in many surprising ways.

All the articles share an understanding that transnationalism complements other approaches in focusing on dimensions of the Jewish experience, that rather than being a subject in and of itself, it enhances understandings of the religious, social, economic, cultural, and political lives of the Jews wherever they lived, and in whatever era. They contend that Jewish lives, like those of most people at most times, transcended the limitations of any one nation state and its borders. Rather in the cases explicated by these articles, American Jews inhabited worlds characterized by multiple exchanges and influence that went in various directions.

For the most part, American Jewish history, like so many others, has been narrated through the lens of one-way movements, journeys from some place of origin, often thought of as the sending society, or analytically even more problematic, “the Old World” – deliberately written out with capital letters as though it referred to a real, single place – and after that the narratives tell

what happened, how, and when within the geographic borders of the United States. As such, most of the historiography has given short shrift to reverse and multiple migrations, political demands, cultural influences, and the exchange of goods, both cultural and more quotidian, that linked Jews together beyond borders.

The collection of articles, and the emerging network of researchers who honed their approaches through several workshops, seek to highlight how transnational approaches can shed new light on key aspects of the American Jewish experience. They suggest, strongly, that analysis need not stop at any fixed national boundary.

Likewise, we contend as do the articles, that modern Jewish lives, whether on a personal or communal level – experienced outside of the United States (in the case of these articles essentially central Europe) were also fundamentally transnational and shaped by the involvement of American Jews, whether in the political, religious, or economic spheres. Jews around the world felt the impact of the options and expectations of Jews in the United States.

The editors and the authors here certainly did not invent the concept of transnationalism in Jewish history or stumble upon it on their own. A select bibliography of works taking transnational approaches makes it clear that many came before us. The listing of scholarly works included here provides a sampling of previous scholarship, offering an orientation as to the state of the field. This selective bibliography reflects that Jewish history has been constitutionally transnational, that scholars recognized it without affixing to it that label, but that only recently has the fact of the transnationalism become a broader interest and more deliberately interrogated.<sup>3</sup> That is, by giving this concept its name, these articles and the others which we hope they will inspire help bring transnationalism out of the background. We think that the field should move it on to center stage.

Clearly the existing scholarship leaves much room for new projects and topics. Only in the past ten years or so have scholars of American Jewish history begun to reflect upon the chances for and the difficulties of doing

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Micha J. Perry and Rebekka Vofß, "Approaching Shared Heroes: Cultural Transfer and Transnational Jewish History," *Jewish History* 30 (2016): 1–13, here 6. Significantly, the American Jewish Historical Society devoted its 2016 biennial scholars' conference to the topic "Global Perspectives on Jews and the Americas."

such work. They have started discussing the methodologies and theories of transnationalism as they approach to their subject. “It is useful [for historians of American Jewry] to pay attention to the transnational elements that have characterized Jewish history for centuries,” Paula Hyman pointed out in 2009. An edited volume published in 2014 was hailed as the first collection of articles to demonstrate “how transnationalism illuminates some of the classic issues in American Jewish history, as well as those that have been overlooked, and offers methodological approaches to be emulated.”<sup>4</sup>

American Jewish studies have lagged behind the transnational turn in history and social sciences for various reasons. Among them, the sheer size of the American Jewish community and the entanglement of scholarship with local and national Jewish communities, via donor funding, choice of study topics as identity expression, and scholarship in the service of communal concerns, have tended to focus scholarly attention on Jewish experiences in America, as do practical questions, such as language skills. The importance of Israel, again for scholarly and communal attention, can come at the cost of greater attention to other Jewries, especially European Jewries, whose relationship to American Jews is rarely studied beyond questions of migration, the Holocaust, or as a foil for American Jewry. The latter effect is related to yet another factor limiting American Jewish interest in transnational connections with other Jewries: a Jewish version of American exceptionalism that has been questioned and debunked in progressive academia as much as it has been maintained and cherished in civil-religious political rhetoric, particularly on the right side of the American political spectrum.<sup>5</sup> We might say that the writing of American Jewish history has followed closely the patterns of the writing of American history more broadly, and as a field it has been notoriously national, assuming that what went on elsewhere had little

<sup>4</sup> Paula E. Hyman, “We Are All Post-Jewish Historians Now: What American Jewish History Brings to the Table.” *American Jewish History* 95 (2009): 53–60, here 57; Riv-Ellen Prell, “Remapping American Jewish History as Transnational” [Review of Ava Kahn and Adam D. Mendelsohn, eds., *Transnational Traditions: New Perspectives on American Jewish History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014)], *H-Net Review*, August 2015, accessed October 15, 2021, <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43967>.

<sup>5</sup> For a fuller version of these explanations for American and European scholars’ relative disinterest in transnational American Jewish studies, cf. Markus Krah, “Clinging to Borders and Boundaries? The (Sorry) State of Transnational American Jewish Studies,” *American Jewish History* 101 (2017): 519–533.

impact on what Americans did, said, or thought. The kind of isolationism that pervaded American rhetoric played itself out in the work of historians well beyond those who study the Jewish past. It can seem like historians of American Jewry took George Washington's 1796 warning against "foreign entanglements," a phrase we respectfully claim for this issue's title, to heart when it came to looking beyond the borders of the US.

Training our sights on the other side of the Atlantic, as Washington did, we find very limited interest in the American Jewish experience on the part of European scholars of modern Jewry. In Germany, in particular, the academic study of Judaism and Jewish history was shaped by its origins in the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* approach that defined its subjects, following the knowledge orders of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, in relationship with ancient history, philology, and Oriental studies. An elite of European scholars of Judaism, due to the absence of counterparts in the US until well into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, had few reasons, and resources to engage with American Jewry.

It behooves us to say something about the specifically German focus of the transnational articles included here, as it reflects yet another recent development in the field. Clearly the idea of studying how American Jews interacted with and exchanged ideas, texts, and practices with other Jewries offers much promise, and in the ideal a body of literature will emerge which connects movements back and forth to other nations and regions, eastern Europe, the Levant, North Africa, Canada, Latin America, and more.

But Germany and the German-influenced lands have indeed provided the first and heretofore most fruitful area for research for those interested in American Jewish transnationality. This may be explained by the fact that the subject benefits from its own inner exceptionalism. For multiple reasons, the German Jewish religious, cultural, intellectual, and social modernization and its horrific ending in the caesura of the Holocaust have made for an irrevocable special role of anything German in Jewish history, including the role of German Jewries in relation to other Jewish communities and in particular in the history of American Jewry. The efflorescence of Jewish scholarship in late-20<sup>th</sup>-century Germany also provides an explanation for why this topic has yielded so much new interest. The number of scholars in Germany who have taken up the study of Jewish history, and of American Jewish history, far outpaces the number in any other place outside the United States, a matter itself worthy of contemplation.



Migrations, large-scale and individual, have been the most important exception to the relative disinterest of American Jewish scholars in their subject's connections with other Jewries. Yet most studies which have taken migration as the starting point, have never gone beyond the description of where Jews left and where they then went. These histories essentially dropped from their analysis the constant transnational connections forged by those who left and settled in the United States, for example, and those who remained behind, or with their friends and family who chose other destination homes.

These connections among individuals, families, friends, and *landsleyt* form networks that are often personal and thus less visible to outside observers than the transnational relations between institutions and organizations. Rabbinical seminaries, as one contribution to this issue shows, were connected by religious ideologies and curricula that allowed for the transfer and exchange of students and scholars, who in turn formed their own transnational networks with ideas, knowledge, texts, and books flowing between nodes in different directions, making for modern Jewish epistemologies. In fact, one may argue that crucial processes of Jewish modernization occurred in transnational connections. Several landmark institutions can illustrate this argument: B'nai Brith was founded in New York in 1843, but over time spread across the Jewish world with its mission to provide comfort and security to the Jewish people. As such it fulfilled many functions of tradition-oriented premodern Jewish communities.<sup>6</sup> On the other end of the political spectrum, the Bund, founded in 1897 in Vilna, brought a Jewishly flavored type of socialism from eastern Europe to the US, where it faced a complex constellation of social and political forces that reshaped the organization and its ideology.<sup>7</sup> YIVO, the Jewish Scientific Institute, also founded in Vilna in 1925, de facto transferred its operations to New York in 1940 and aspired to be the guardian of the east European Jewish heritage in the New World, which required the fundamental recalibration of its original mission.<sup>8</sup> Another institution engaging in

<sup>6</sup> Cornelia Wilhelm, *The Independent Orders of B'nai B'rith and True Sisters: Pioneers of a New Jewish Identity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Jack Jacobs, ed., *Jewish Politics in Eastern Europe: The Bund at 100* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Cecile Esther Kuznitz, *YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture: Scholarship for the Yiddish Nation*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

transnational issues, the Leo Baeck Institute is devoted to the preservation of the heritage of German-speaking Jewry.<sup>9</sup>

Material objects, depending on their size and other factors, texts, and ideas may travel lighter than institutions and ideas, but they, too, have to contend with restrictions, questions of acceptance or rejection, their transformation in new environments, and the dynamic interaction with national and transnational factors shaping Jewish lives, interests, and identities. Their study brings the additional consideration of commercial factors, as objects and ideas are produced, sold, traded, and discarded according to their perceived value. Given their greater mobility, they can acquire transnational dimensions more easily, if only by expressing or symbolizing commitments to ideas and ideals of Jewishness, Jewish authenticity, or the community transcending the realities of the present time and place. Books and other publications give physical expression to ideas, all of which become entangled in transnational processes, as various papers in this issue show. Their transnational claims and adaptability notwithstanding, texts and ideas can face difficult processes of translation – linguistic, cultural, and political – from one context to others. These contexts can differ in language, cultural sensibilities, and ideological commitments – all shaped by different *national* environments that can rub against or undermine the *transnational* ambitions and claims of texts and ideas circulating among them. In different cases, their transnational movements may serve to refine, adjust, adapt, and update ideas, as they are mediated into new contexts which in the process are changed by such transnational importations.

The potential insights gained from the study of the circulation and connections of people and institutions, objects and ideas, promise to be as richly diverse as their subjects. They are tied together by the overarching insight that transnational approaches to national experiences of a given Jewish community, like the American one, can supplement extant and future scholarship that focuses on what is distinctly American about American Jewry. They raise old-new questions about American Jewish exceptionalism and distinctiveness. As such, these insights should serve to prevent essentializing or reifying understandings of Americanness, Jewishness, or, for that matter Germanness, or the

<sup>9</sup> Christhard Hoffmann, ed., *Preserving the Legacy of German Jewry: A History of the Leo Baeck Institute, 1955–2005* (Tuebingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

qualities of yet other contexts of Jewish life past and present. They promise a better understanding of the Jewish experiences in various locations at various times, entangled as they have been among themselves and with their respective political, social, cultural, economic, and religious environments.