

schlechterforschung [bezieht sich] auf unmögliche, aber unverzichtbare epistemische Referenzsubjekte [...]: Frauen und Männer“ (8). Indem die Autor\_innen darlegen, wie Wissen über Geschlecht Frauen- und Männer(bilder) im Laufe der Geschichte auf unterschiedliche Weise konstruierte, scheint darin die Hoffnung jeder genealogischen Arbeit auf, dass unser gegenwärtiges Wissen über Geschlecht ebenso im Werden und damit potenziell veränderbar ist, wie es das in der Vergangenheit war.

### Hannah Holme

**Kenneth B. Moss:**  
***Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution.***  
**Cambridge / London: Harvard University Press 2009.**

**Tony Michels:**  
***A Fire in Their Hearts. Yiddish Socialists in New York.***  
**Cambridge / London: Harvard University Press 2005.**

Considering Kenneth Moss' and Tony Michels' work and keeping in mind questions of 'contested orders' might be of interest for those researching on diverging (Jewish) culturist and nationalist concepts. Both authors deal with ideas, identifications, social location and commonalities that 'got lost' on the way; that are not 'relevant' any more [1]. This is to say that the two books converge both in their historiographical approaches, and in retracing the process to negotiate what is to be *yidishe kultur* ('Yiddish' and 'Jewish' culture). They differ in place, but not in social (self-) location. Furthermore, apart from exclusive, collectivist notions of cultures, ethnicities and identities, Moss and Michels deal with more ambiguous and less constraining self-understandings, as these terms imply [2].

Both books show, that there were different visions of and shared assumptions about *naye yidishe kultur* (new Jewish culture) among Jews that took part in the Russian Revolution. What Kenneth Moss calls the 'Jewish cultural project' was controversial from its beginnings under czarist rule, and

[1] For a focus on 'the roads not taken' in Jewish nationalist and political ideas see also Pianko, N. (2010) *Zionism & The Roads Not Taken*. Rawidowicz, Kaplan, Cohn. Bloomington, Indianapolis.

[2] Brubaker, R. (2006) *Ethnicity without groups*. Cambridge/ London.

later violently transformed by the Bolshevik power. Following postnationalist Jewish historians who have found a range of ‘exceptions’ to the assumptions of nationalist *intelligentsia*, Moss identifies tension-ridden links between Jewish cultural life and Jewish nationalist political ideas. For Moss, these ‘exceptions’ would be better understood as inherent aspects of the very idea of the new Jewish culture. He relates these controversies and tensions to the strong influence of culture, that had intellectuals hold on to their ideas and conceptions, rather than doing and writing about what seemed to be the obligation of their political commitments (ch.3).

The Jewish cultural project is an effort to modernize, mobilize and discipline Jewish culture. It includes the idea of culture as an innovation to be planned, built and developed - an idea that embraces a sphere of arts, that needs to allow creative planning, building, and developing by providing institutional and sociological conditions (ch.4). That is educated cultural *entrepreneurs* and audiences were supposed to be raised within a liberal sphere, independent of surrounding cultures, market demands, political ideologies and any perceived need of the nation. Proponents wanted to create a Yiddish culture, which was meant to be open and spontaneous. Considering the specificities of time and space, Moss points to the seemingly chaotic period of 1917-1919 in Russia with moments of open expression and enacting of what had been several decades in the making.

Tensions within self-understandings and social location are illustrated in Dovid Bergelson’s novel *Opgang* (Descent), which he wrote in the years 1918 and 1919. The Kievan Yiddish writer, cultural autonomist and socialist celebrated quite a respectable cultural and literary capital by 1917. But in what would become a well-known novel, Bergelson turned away from his political activism, opposing the current revolutionary optimism, heroism and elevated mood. Instead his writing depicts characters of prerevolutionary small-town Jewish life, torn between political ideals and lost communality. By doing so he still promotes Yiddishism – a call for a monolingual, secular Yiddish culture – even against ‘class enemies’, political opponents and the demands of revolutionary literary ‘relevance’. Bergelson was thereafter attacked by nationalists for failing to serve the national cause, as well as by communists and socialists for failing to serve and thereby subverting ‘the Revolution’.

Traditional norms were unsettled and Jewish identification and collectivity were to be reinforced. In this context some East European Jews “rejected or simply never considered” (11) that modernization would alter or erase their Jewishness however defined, and sought their understanding of Jewish modernity. Instead, the idea of a full-fledged, separate Jewish version of the pan-European

institution of culture was peculiar to East European Jewish modernity (ch.5). Culturists insisted on the importance of bringing ‘Hellenic’, ‘European’ and ‘universal’ aesthetic and intellectual dimensions into the emerging Hebrew and Yiddish cultural spheres. They imitated a metropolitan culture, which allowed various or even opposing conceptions of culture and personhood. Art had to have its own right, its legitimacy, and writers and artists often felt uncomfortable or irresponsible with regard to the perceived needs of the nation. So both critics and champions of Europeanization in Jewish art recognized ‘inner needs’, or younger Jewish ‘desires’, and did not simply appeal to ideological principles as framed in terms of ‘the good of the nation’. Importance was seen in the present situation, needs and perspectives, whereas the ‘purpose’, for which art and culture ‘should’ educate its audiences was of less consequence.

Inner conflicts and ambiguities were part of the normative vision of a ‘Western European’ cultural ethos that placed Jewish culturists in tension with their desire to serve as the guides to their nation. They operated with conflicting ideas – with Herderian notions of folk essence bound up in the Yiddish and Hebrew languages and an anti-essentialist conception of national language. By doing so they perceived language as permeable membrane. The national languages were supposed to empower ‘all’ dimensions of Jewish thought and expression, rather than limit the expressions to any kind of nativizing content. Jewish culturists sought to no longer be bound to define or question Jewish identity. Following Moss, one of the remnants of this idea and the most striking testament to post-identity based possibilities today, is the growing participation of Israeli Arabs in Hebrew cultural life, substructured by a framework of ethnopolitical conflict and discrimination. Thus the Jewish cultural project did not only allow, but also compelled “the enactment (however imperfect) of cosmopolitan ideals” (289).

Jewish culturists did adjust to the constraints of party politics during the process of consolidation of the Soviet regime (ch.6). In the initial years, the Soviet Union made Jewish culture a state obligation. Yiddishists, as a result, would gain privileges and resources, such as the permission to live in writers’ housing communities. This incorporation was not simply a matter of suppression. As Moss argues, the Bolshevik order managed to transform the Jewish cultural project. Since arts and culture were framed in terms of ‘the Revolution’, this project proved to be attractive and agonizing as well.

Tony Michels shows how *yidische kultur* was negotiated among Yiddish speaking socialists in New York until 1918, when writing in Yiddish was not subject of debate any more. Michels demonstrates what is characteristic to New York City, but equally points out the mutuality of influence: The immigrating East-European Jewish workers, that were accused of carrying radical ideas to a peaceful, non-radical America, “moved back and forth across the Atlantic, publications circulated from country to country, and organizations were transplanted overseas” (6).

Intellectuals played a decisive role in promoting *yidische kultur*. Seen from the perspective of Russian officials, such intellectuals would be considered criminals, and it seems to be typical for radical biographies, either to have been in or to have fled from prison. But as diverse as they were, seen from the perspective of their listeners (which were not always followers) with similar experiences, they “were men and women who, as youths in Russia, had rebelled against religious tradition, achieved some level of secular education, and participated in, or at least sympathized with, one or another revolutionary party. They possessed an acute awareness of themselves as historical actors, as if the fate of an entire people depended on what they said and did. This was [...] an urgent response to events that affected Jews on both sides of the Atlantic: strikes, pogroms, wars, and revolutions” (10). Everyone could meet them on roofs, in apartments or cafés and in parks, read and hear about Yiddish socialism in newspapers or while passing by the many soapbox preachers. Still, there was not ‘the’ Yiddish socialist: “socialists, anarchists, agnostics, atheists, and run-of-the-mill radicals” (39) met in unions and *fareynen* (societies) like the *Arbeter Ring* and the *United Hebrew Trades*, gathered for lectures and events, parades or (boat-) excursions – they came together and were different in background and ideas. Also, the act of reading a particular newspaper – and there had never been before such variety in the Yiddish press (ch.2) – it did not necessarily mean that the reader identified wholly with its political agenda. Few read a single newspaper, and there were many reasons for choosing one particular: its literary offerings, practical information or entertaining feuds between writers. However, in all cases, the readers showed an openness to ‘radical’ ideas.

The reason for this diverse arrangement is that the content itself was strongly disputed (ch.4). The question of what *yidische kultur* was supposed to be relates to the question most Jews at this time were asking: How does (which) Judaism relate to (what kind of) modernity, and which kind of emancipation is realistic and legitimate? Even the very terms of what it meant to be both a socialist and *veltlekh* (worldly) caused rupture – especially when considered in connection with any ‘Jewish’

particularity. Such terms did refer to organizations like political parties, unions, literary clubs, and theater or chess groups – all in the Yiddish language. As such language emerged the lowest common denominator able to contain the ongoing tensions between radical ideas aimed at abolishing class segregation and private property, and practical considerations aimed at immediate reform and relief. Moreover, these tensions were influenced by contemporary events, such as strikes, economic recession, rising antisemitism, political repression or uprisings in other countries.

Being “Jewish” was either seen as part of illegitimate separatism, or on the contrary, as inherent part of rejecting the “mind-your-own-business”-culture (215). The latter would oppose New York’s street culture and foster their own views of *mentshlekhkeyt* (civility and humanity), *yidishe kultur* and socialism in *fortbildung fareynen* (educational societies). The most prominent figure among them was Chaim Zhitlovsky (ch.3), who promoted a Yiddish cultural renaissance, that addresses general civil and political questions. He opposed the distinction between a particular Jew and the universal man. *Yidishkeyt* was seen by Zhitlovsky as quasi-sacred mission of socialist *oyfklerung* (enlightenment) – secular education with emphasis on *visnshaft* (natural and social sciences). This was realized in the Yiddish newspapers, and in the socialist Sunday schools, that were founded in opposition to public education. Both newspapers and schools had similar syllabi: Yiddish language and literature, Jewish history, biographies of reformers and revolutionaries, political economy, natural sciences, questions on parents’ authority and current uprisings, strikes and past incidents that promoted communal connectedness, such as the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire.

Critics held that Jewish separatism was probably necessary in Russia, but certainly not in the US, where Jews enjoyed equal rights. The most prominent proponent of this position was Abe Cahan, the head of the *Forverts* newspaper, which became the most widely circulating Yiddish newspaper in the world (another source of dispute: it was later attacked for its bureaucratic ‘machinery’). Cahan considered equal legal status as an accomplished aim of the political struggle. For those following him social questions were the only relevant questions to be raised. Proponents would argue as Emma Goldman did, that social injustice was not limited to Jews. A valid point for Michels is the question: What else was *yidishkeyt* supposed to be, once there were parties, unions, newspapers and excursions in Yiddish. A lot of culturists did not say what they meant by *yidishe kultur*, referring instead to the ‘objective’ social base they deemed necessary to its survival.

So in its core the dispute was about Americanization and the implicit demand to speak English without accent. For Cahan there was no need to translate major works into Yiddish since, if people were adequately educated, they could read them in the original 'high' German, Russian or English language as well. If not, according to Cahan, they should be educated as Americans. Others perceived the US to be a nation of many nationalities and rejected the idea of a (quasi-) melting pot. A range of cultural nationalists (like Horace Kallen, Rabbi Judah Magnes or Randolph Bourne), criticized the concept and the implication that differences should be melted into one preassumed American unity.

In this context, the historiographical approach turns out to be crucial: Why should social scientists be aware of ambiguities, nonconformities, outsiders and 'losers'? Michels points out a problem in historiography: "[t]hemes of loss, alienation, ambivalence, disappointment, and rebellion – all prominent in American Jewish fiction and autobiography (in Yiddish and English) – barely exist in the major works of American Jewish history. Subjects that might reveal a less-than-sanguine version of the past have been filtered out or relegated to the background. In the success story that American Jewish history has become, the radical experience has been made irrelevant" (19). Those experiences might have been flattened, but they were part of the experience of American Jews. They shaped their self-perceptions and their history.

Shortly after 1917 (ch.5) most of the socialist societies and newspapers were pro-Soviet, enthusiastically supporting the Russian efforts to defeat the tsarist army. Massive labor conflicts and a general strike in Seattle were signs that people perceived themselves to be at the beginning of a new era. But soon attraction and repulsion towards 'Moscow' grew, as persecution in Russia and the Red Scare in the US revived. The reproach of not being sufficiently 'radical' enough or not adequately serving 'the Revolution' was no longer part of any benevolent debate, but served hegemonic, homogenizing and ostracizing claims. This shows, how negotiations of self-perceptions and cultural understandings rely on the conditions to be perceived and distributed, variable according to contemporary events and experiences made.

## **Lilian Türk**