

The Other Jewish Question: Identifying the Jew and Making Sense of Modernity

By Jay Geller

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Fordham University Press, 2011. Pp. XIV+510

ISBN 978-0-8232-3362-5

Price: \$99.00

The Jewish question (*Judenfrage*), discussed by both Jews and Gentiles, articulated the ways that Jews could be integrated into society. Jay Geller provides the reader with a different approach the traditional discourse on the Jewish Question, particularly highlighting the ‘other Jewish question’, summed up as the way Jews sought to define themselves as public European individuals while at the same time contesting, negotiating, and to an extent, erasing their Jewish identity. *The Other Jewish Question*, articulates the negotiation and transformation of *Judentum* by assimilated German-Speaking Jews between emancipation and the Shoah. The other Jewish question mirrored the development of emancipation and indicated, according to Geller’s analysis, the failure of assimilation. The nineteenth-century cultural ideal of *Bildung*, individual cultivation through neo-humanist education thought of as necessary to prove oneself as both citizen and human within the German-speaking middle class, was not enough for these Jews who constantly had to negotiate their public and Jewish identities.

Geller examines the period between Rahel Levin Varnhagen’s birth (1771) through to the death of Walter Benjamin (1940), particularly highlighting a period when the “Jew’s body incarnated, and discourse about that body fleshed out, the icon ‘Jew’” (2). The Jewish body, and the objects and discourses that surround it, i.e money, cloth etc. are the subject of this study. During the nineteenth and twentieth century, the body was the marker of difference. Racial and ethnic differences, such as those defined within the bodies of the Gentile and Jew, were charged with ideas of gender order. The body marked who was male and female as well as articulated the function of that individual. If the body was masculine it was social, if that body was female it was natural; bodies would then be assigned to certain spheres and regulated. Within this work the reader notices the interesting ways modern society was organized and divided following the construction of public and private spheres. As Geller points out in his definition of modernity, identities were crystallized and organized during this period while the Jewish body remained an anomaly (9).

The Other Jewish Question is separated into nine chapters that highlight the themes of modernity, identity formation, gender ambiguity, and a desire to ‘overcome’ Jewishness. Chapters one and two provide the reader with an in-depth exploration of the construction of gender ambiguity beginning with

Baruch Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* and its discussion of circumcision as a marker of Jewish difference and of the persistence of the Jewish nation throughout history (33). It was considered not only a symbol of Jewish cultural, religious, and sexual difference but also a practice of "unmanning".

Chapter three continues the focus on the ritual of circumcision and the influence it had in the construction of gendered Jewish identification. Geller examines within this chapter the development of bio-political discourse and the ideas of disease and degeneration, particularly with the rise of political anti-Semitism during the late nineteenth-century. Circumcision was tied to diseased reproduction and fit into a larger discussion on the fear of syphilis and contagion as well as to discussion of diseases' effect on the social body (89-91). Medical and biological theories of contagion and disease seen as originating from the Jewish body replaced older religious anti-Judaism with pseudo-scientific racial anti-Semitism.

Chapter four is dedicated to tracing Jewish circumcision within Rahel Levin Varnhagen's writing. Rahel Levin Varnhagen, born in Berlin in May 19, 1771 to a wealthy Jewish Family, was one of the leading ladies of Salon culture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, hosting leading intellectuals such as Wilhelm von Humboldt and Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel. She converted to Christianity with her marriage to Karl August Varnhagen von Ense. Within this short biography we can see she exemplifies an interesting mix of Judaism and Germaness. Geller notes within this chapter the interesting mix we could read from her many names (Rahel Levin, Rahel Robert, Rahel Robert-Tronow, Antonie Friederick Robert etc), a mix of a Jewish last name and her Christian husband's name, signalled other characteristics that are vital in understanding how she constructed her identity (134).

Rahel Levin Varnhagen demonstrates "normative Jewish identification figured by the male Jew, social integration through marriage, and the impossibility of Jewish acculturation into her contemporary Berlin society" (ibid). Noticing the failure of *Bildung* to allow for a full integration into German society, Varnhagen articulated her difference through the symbol of circumcision. Geller explores Varnhagen's letters to David Veit, where he finds that she articulated difference through the symbol of circumcision. Her 'circumcised heart' adopted the characteristics of the male circumcision (142).

Chapters five and six explore the anti-Semitic discourse surrounding Jewish diet practices and "Jewish scent", particularly focusing on the writings of Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx. Geller highlights the ways in which Feuerbach and Marx built their identification of the Jew based on past Jewish representations. Chapters seven and eight are dedicated to Max Nordau, before his endorsement of Zionism in 1895, and Daniel Paul Schreber, respectively. Geller reads into the silences within Max Nordau's early pre-Zionist writings on

the subject of the Jewish question and notes that within his writings there was an interesting use of Jewish representational tropes such as his “Philistine”. The “Philistines” are unimaginative and embody what they believe is proper European culture (218). The Philistine mirrored anti-Semitic discourse on the artificiality of the Jew. Nordau’s discussion of cultural degeneration also maintained symbols that were closely associated with Jewish-attributed cultural motifs. Nordau’s opening litany maintained manifestations of illness within Jewish markers, connecting it to foreign, mostly Jewish, emigrants hurting the body of the nation and state institutions (222). Nordau, like many other highly assimilated Jews, sought to eliminate Jewish difference in order to demonstrate that there was no such thing as a “Jewish race” (216).

Geller interestingly opposes this to Daniel Paul Schreber’s obsession with Jewish representation and the fear of Gentile degeneration. Schreber, a chief judge of the Dresden State Superior Court who, diagnosed as a paranoiac, published his memoirs that chronicled his confinement and “transformation” into the Wandering Jew (233). The chapter charts the dislocation of identity, particularly focusing on the figure of the “unmanned, non-Jewish Eternal Jew” (235). Within the transformation of Schreber the reader notices the narratives of diseased sexuality, diseased reproduction, and gender ambiguity (255). Geller analyzes Schreber’s memoir as a mirror to which *Judentum* was identified.

Geller’s last chapter on Walter Benjamin summarizes the failure of emancipation. Geller demonstrates that Benjamin’s terms Aura and Mimesis were “conjoined with a number of other phenomena that filled the landscape that Germanophone Jews traversed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries”(258). Within Benjamin’s work the negotiation between Jewish and German identity was an ongoing process (266). Benjamin symbolizes, according to Geller, the last great debate of German-Jewish identity before the Shoah.

Although naturally the work cannot discuss all aspects of the phenomenon, Geller’s choice of individuals to analyze is interesting. The silence of German-Jewish women—with the exception of Varnhagen—is particularly telling. Geller’s work is largely based on male sources that explored Jewish male identity. It would be interesting to see how German-Jewish women such as the writer Gertrud Kolmar, a German lyric poet born in Berlin in 1894 and murdered during the Final solution, would participate in answering the other Jewish question. Geller’s decision to end this work with the Shoah also demonstrates one of the limitations of this study. Did the other Jewish question cease to exist among Jews? Is it only a German-Jewish phenomenon? It would be interesting to see how this study would have progressed with a discussion of Zionist writings and the “re-imagined” Jew.

Another interesting omission within Geller’s work is the lack of discussion on the Jewish Enlightenment. The Jewish Enlightenment is arguably

one of the most telling episodes of negotiation between European and Jewish identity, to which Geller devotes only a footnote (albeit, longer than a page) (322). Notwithstanding these limitations, Geller does provide his reader with an interesting discussion of modernity and negotiation of Jewish identity within German-speaking Europe.

Deciding to use the term “identification” rather than “identity”, Geller demonstrates that he sought an investigation of “processes”, which means not taking identity as a fixed construct (2). It is clear within Geller’s work that there is an interesting paradox between modernity as being a time of crystallization and categorization and modernity as the disruption of order. The processes of identification are part of this growing struggle to define one’s identity, as Geller’s discussion of *Judentum* shows.

Jay Geller’s *The Other Jewish Question* is a fascinating work that demonstrates the construction of the “other”, ideas of modernity, and the complexity of German-Jewish identity within a wide selection of literary sources. The struggle between belonging and otherness does not end with the Shoah. Geller alludes to the continuation of this struggle, especially within popular culture, within his introduction highlighting a game-show parody on Saturday Night Live called “Jew, Not a Jew”, where contestants attempt to define the Jewish woman by the size of her nose (1). Saturday Night Live’s parody “Jew, Not a Jew” highlights that the other Jewish question is very much alive today.

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