The Future of the German-Jewish Past

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Published by Purdue University Press

Reuveni, Gideon and Diana Franklin.
The Future of the German-Jewish Past: Memory and the Question of Antisemitism.
Purdue University Press, 2020.
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I begin this essay with a brief depiction of Jewish studies in Austria. I will point out an apparent flaw in the organization of this discipline in the Austrian context, which has had particular repercussions on how scholars compose historical narratives. I argue that this oversight in the field fosters the use of dichotomous categories. Even though the employment of binaries in describing the Jewish and non-Jewish relationship in the past as well as in the present is not restricted to Austrian scholars of Jewish studies, indeed it is characteristic of Jewish historiography in general; various idiosyncrasies of the Austrian academic system have produced particularly fertile ground for the application of a pronounced Jewish and non-Jewish dualism. The main purpose of this article is to introduce an analytical concept that can be used to replace a binary conception of Jewish historical narratives.

JEWISH STUDIES IN AUSTRIA

Jewish studies in Austria, as in most other European countries, are of recent origin. In contrast to the Institute for Judaic Studies at the University in Vienna, founded after World War II, the establishment of Jewish studies can be traced back to the late 1980s (Institute for Jewish History in Austria, located in St. Pölten) and the beginning of the twenty-first century (Center for Jewish Cultural History at the University of Salzburg and Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Graz). The latter institutions have in common that they owe their existence at least in part to a political climate that differed from the atmosphere during the first four decades of the postwar period. The
new era broke ground after Kurt Waldheim won the 1986 presidential elections, and we must understand these shifts in the academic political climate as a reaction to his political success on the national level.

Waldheim was a controversial and divisive candidate. During his campaign, an investigative journalist brought to light that the former secretary-general of the United Nations had tried to gloss over some aspects of his activities during the Nazi period in his published biography. When faced with criticism of his tampering with his biographical account, Waldheim fixated on his version despite ample evidence to the contrary. He denied, for example, his documented membership in the National Socialist Party and steadfastly asserted that he had not been aware of the deportation of Jews from Thessaloniki/Greece while he had served there as an intelligence officer.⁴

While Waldheim was pestered by journalists, Austrians’ simultaneously sloppy and shrewd handling of their past seeped into their focus as well. Following the Second World War, the country’s politicians had vehemently rejected any accusations regarding Austria’s complicity in the Shoah. They claimed instead that the country had been the first victim of Nazi Germany’s aggression.⁵ This position once served political goals, purportedly helping the country to reach independence, but was no longer tenable in the 1980s. Historians had already debunked the so-called victim myth. This myth even came to be recognized as a reason for Waldheim’s electoral success in that it impeded efforts to bring the country’s population to terms with their Nazi past.⁶

Although various critics of Waldheim’s candidacy were vocal in admonishing Austrians not to vote for him because his election could fray their country’s relations with other nations, people reacted with utmost disbelief when pertinent measures were put into practice. French, German, and other politicians shunned the newly elected Austrian president, reduced contacts with Austria’s political sphere, and thus made Austrians understand that their dealing with the past was out of line with internationally acknowledged standards. This situation was only remedied by former chancellor Franz Vranitzky’s visit to Israel in 1993. In a widely acknowledged speech at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, he rejected Austria’s self-deluding notion of being the first victim of Nazi Germany and admitted instead that many Austrians in fact supported, and by their own activities contributed to the Shoah.

In this context, the establishment of Jewish studies in Austria, although initiated by scholars, fits into a larger political strategy whose purpose was to rehabilitate Austria’s demolished reputation. Other measures taken in this context were the restoration of synagogues destroyed by the Nazis and the opening of the Jewish Museum in Vienna.⁷ Many of these initiatives were entirely, or at least overwhelmingly, funded with public money. These efforts taken to incorporate Jewish studies into Austria’s academic landscape met with both approval and resistance. This push-and-pull was particularly
the case in Graz where some in the university establishment initially attempted to disrupt the establishment of the Center for Jewish Studies. I wish to stress, however, that these efforts at derailing what was then a new initiative were motivated by parochial reasons, rather than by anti-Jewish sentiments.

Unlike in St. Pölten, Jewish studies in Graz and Salzburg have become affiliated with universities. This constellation has many advantages, but downsides as well. The drawbacks came to the fore in the involuntary involvement of Jewish studies in university politics and entanglement in old boy networks, as a recent job appointment illuminates. In spring 2017, the University of Graz announced a search for a new chair in Jewish studies, the purpose of which was to establish a better profile and greater international prestige for the Center for Jewish Studies. There was a stipulation, however, that eligible candidates had to be affiliated with the local university. The search committee was thus not to find the best possible candidate for the job. It became evident that the purpose of the committee was to make sure that a particular scholar from the university, to whom the new position had been previously promised, would in fact receive the appointment. This approach, a clear deviation from internationally standardized procedures of filling academic positions, nevertheless drew two applications. A top American university had also invited one of the two applicants to apply for a position in their Jewish studies department, around the time when the announcement at the University of Graz was made public on its website. The reason for the invitation, so the official letter said, was the quality of the scholar’s publications. At the University of Graz, his application was rejected because of his job title. His publishing record, teaching accomplishments, and the prestigious grants that he had received throughout his career were not taken into consideration for the decision.

This is not to say that the scholar who had been promised and was finally appointed to the Jewish studies chair was not an ideal candidate. The procedure suggests, however, that conditions at the University of Graz, which are not much different from those at other Austrian universities, nurture a secluded intellectual atmosphere in which scholarly innovations occur not because of—but rather despite—given structures. The academic setting itself provides no incentive for academic achievements, but rather promotes inert stagnancy. This phenomenon came to the fore in a review of an application for a research grant drafted by an Austrian Jewish studies scholar. The proposal had been submitted to the Österreichische Nationalbank, one of the few institutions in Austria that fund basic research in the humanities. The referee reviewing the application castigated the research description by citing an irritatingly outdated and essentialist conception of Jewishness, a gesture that was in part even reminiscent of the deterministic thinking characteristic of Nazi ideology. Again, this incident is not characteristic of Austrian-Jewish studies in their entirety, but indicative of an academic climate in which such drawbacks are allowed to thrive.
Essentialized thinking among Jewish studies scholars is not a necessary prerequisite for the composition of historical accounts predicated on a Jewish and non-Jewish dichotomy. There are other causes as well. But essentialist thinking always entails binary categorizations. And such binaries, I wish to argue, characterize many, if not all, Jewish historical narratives, even those on Jewish and non-Jewish entanglement or hybridity. Although other academic settings may prove themselves more stimulating to innovative research, their scholars have not rid themselves altogether of the Jewish and non-Jewish dualism either. The purpose of the following pages is to present a methodological approach through which dichotomous descriptions may be abrogated. Such a new approach will hopefully be of interest to scholars of Jewish studies outside of Austria as well.

THE TENACIOUSNESS OF DICHTOMOUS THINKING

Dichotomous thinking appears to be an anthropological constant, virtually impossible to avoid. The Harvard evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould drew attention to this fact in a noted article published two years before his early death in 2002. He wrote that “we construct our descriptive taxonomies and tell our explanatory stories as dichotomies, or contrasts between inherently distinct and logically opposite alternatives.” The reasons for this procedure “seem to transcend cultural peculiarities” and “may lie deep within the architecture of the human mind.” Rather than locating dichotomous thinking in some neural substrates, Gould draws attention to its pervasiveness and apparently ubiquitous acceptance. It is deeply ingrained in our conception of the world and therefore its cultural conditioning is almost impossible to recognize. Such recognition would be necessary, however, in order to “reject this constraining mental model.”

With respect to Jewish historiography, Gould’s statement implies that the pronounced Jewish and non-Jewish dualism characterizing historical accounts may be less reflective of bygone life-worlds than a consequence of scholars’ restricted thinking. Many research studies conducted over the last two or three decades in the field of Jewish history can indeed be read as endorsing this view: They have brought to light plenty of evidence of Jewish and non-Jewish interactions that jar with the conception, prevalent until the late twentieth century, that Jews led largely isolated lives. A striking example of the discrepancy between historical accounts based on a binary division of Jews and non-Jews and their actual entanglement in the past is the history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. With few exceptions, scholars have sketched—and in part still do—a picture of historical Polish society in which, as
the eminent historian Emanuel Ringelblum wrote in 1932, a “Chinese wall” seems to separate Jewish and non-Jewish Poles. According to Ringelblum they are depicted as being “in a permanent state of endless conflict, if not actual war.” What Ringelblum wanted to convey is the fact that the particular narratives were not shaped by a lack of records demonstrating Jewish and non-Jewish togetherness; rather, they resulted from the scholars’ perspective on Polish society that ignores sources contradicting their narrative.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, historians’ outlook on the Polish past has changed, and considerable evidence of Jewish and non-Jewish interconnectedness has been unearthed. As is widely recognized today, Jews and non-Jews lived in close, and sometimes even intimate proximity over long periods of time. Narratives painting images of Jewish and non-Jewish relations exclusively, or almost exclusively, fraught with tensions and hostility do not correspond with actual historical life-worlds. This is not to say that the entanglement of Jews and non-Jews was free of tensions. At times, violence indeed characterized their relations. However, such conflicts frequently resulted from disagreements over quotidian issues instead of anti-Jewish sentiments. Before Jews and non-Jews engaged in brawls and fights, they often ate and drank together and played cards or music. Against the background of such references, the idea of a separate Jewish existence appears untenable. It is further undermined by Jewish residential patterns in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. As recent research has convincingly shown, the widespread notion of the “Jewish shtetl,” that is, a town where Jews far outnumbered the non-Jewish population and consequently lived in their own microcosm that kept interactions with non-Jews restricted primarily to business matters, is largely a myth. In many cases, Jews were just one of various minorities in these small towns. The administrative records of the Polish settlement of Zamość paradigmatically substantiate this view. In the mid-seventeenth century, Germans and Scots owned twenty-one houses in the town, thirty-two belonged to Armenians, twenty-three to Jews, and the majority to Roman and Greek Catholics. In terms of numbers, non-Jews clearly outnumbered Jews in Zamość. Even more striking is the fact that a considerable section of the Jewish population lived among gentiles. This observation proves true for other shtetls as well. In many towns, Jewish houses were either scattered among buildings occupied by non-Jews, or Jews lived in non-Jewish households (and vice versa). These findings firmly suggest that the association between small towns in Eastern Europe and isolated Jewish existence is a construct that does not reflect historical living practices. Historians’ dichotomous thinking apparently rendered them oblivious to evidence of a Jewish and non-Jewish co-existence. Well until the close of the twentieth century, most of them focused on demarcations and borders instead of entanglement and coexistence, and the widespread conception of the “isolated” shtetl served their purposes.
Apart from the scholars’ “restricted reasoning,” the selection of archival material they analyze for reconstructing the past also contributes to historical accounts characterized by a Jewish and non-Jewish dualism. It is noteworthy that pertinent records consist overwhelmingly of textual sources penned by religious authorities, more often Christian than Jewish. The focus on these documents is partly due to their availability and accessibility. In addition, they easily fit into—and in turn strengthen—the concept of Polish Jewish history characterized by anti-Jewish discrimination. Aspects of the canon law and church legislation aimed at excluding Jews from society at large and relegating them to a marginal position served as evidence of an atmosphere fraught with anti-Jewish sentiments.

This view is not entirely wrong, but nevertheless highly problematic. It depicts Jews merely as passive victims instead of people who helped to shape society and its culture. This is not to say that they are likewise to blame for the Judeo-Christian climate in which they lived. But as some historians seeking to draw a broader picture of Polish society by taking the activities of Jews into account pointed out as early as the 1960s, rabbis also initiated measures against interreligious intermingling. Both Jewish and Christian religious authorities strove to erect boundaries between the two communities. Owing to the societal power structure, however, greater blame must be assigned to the Christian side.

This new approach provided a more comprehensive understanding of the agents causing barriers between the two communities. Nevertheless, it kept the focus among scholars in Jewish studies on the rifts and demarcation lines between them. The question whether they actually determined the lives of people was hardly raised. It took historians around another two decades to concentrate on indications of entanglement rather than separation. Various developments provoked this shift in research, such as the opening of archives in Eastern Europe in the 1990s that provided historians access to a vast amount of heretofore unexplored records and a new conception of the city and interpretation of people’s interactions. The growing interest among scholars in everyday life was also of great relevance. Its reconstruction brought to light that Jews and non-Jews displayed an astonishing degree of togetherness despite arguments to the contrary. At times, the Jewish and non-Jewish interconnectedness made it almost impossible to distinguish them from one another, be it in their behavior or outer appearances. There is evidence that Jews borrowed from and lent clothing to gentiles (and the other way around), despite the fact that this trade of apparel was strictly forbidden. Such examples indicate that laws and proscriptions meant to keep the two groups apart and boundaries between them insuperable must not be taken as proof of an actual Jewish and non-Jewish separation. Ordinary people frequently defied such enactments. Strict compliance with the various ordinances and decrees would probably have disrupted their habitual lives in a way that neither Jews nor
non-Jews were ready to accept. In some regions and under specific circumstances, Jews in particular were able to transgress pertinent rulings by their religious elite because they could evade potential sanctions by turning to municipal courts or the jurisdiction of magnates who, at least in some cases, were more lenient.10

In summary, we may argue that with respect to Eastern Europe there is ample evidence of manifold Jewish and non-Jewish encounters.11 Jews were heavily involved with non-Jews through various forms of interaction. Historians are currently investigating this interconnectedness. Yet, they continue to describe Jews and non-Jews in binary categories. A paradigmatic example of such a scholar is Gershon David Hundert, one of the trailblazers of the narrative of Jewish and non-Jewish entanglement in Eastern Europe.12 On the one hand, he claims that there was no dichotomous juxtaposition of Jews and non-Jews. As he sees it, Polish historiography never considered Jews a “corporate entity.”13 On the other hand, and in contradiction to this assertion, Hundert subscribes to an essentialist—and therefore fundamental—differentiation between Jews and non-Jews.14

We may explain such perseverance in the use of binary divisions by returning to Stephen Jay Gould’s reference to the restrictions of our thinking. Another reason may be linked to the lack of analytical instruments that allow the abandonment of a dualism. In further consequence, historians stick to concepts that often foreground, at least implicitly, a mutual distinctiveness between Jews and non-Jews. Such concepts are assimilation or acculturation. The terms “unassimilated” or “nonacculturated” Jews, for instance, designate those—mostly very orthodox—Jews who keep to themselves and pay heed to cultural boundaries. In a way they are seen as living “beside” or even “outside” society at large into which they integrate by adopting elements of the non-Jewish culture.15 Jewish acculturation thus denotes a trajectory that brings Jews, understood as a distinct entity, closer to their non-Jewish surroundings. The description of the entire process departs from an assumed polarization between those who acculturate/assimilate and those who are in possession of the culture to which the former adapt. Assimilation and acculturation thus ignore the wide array of examples of Jewish and non-Jewish interconnectedness that suggests that Jews were an integral part of the social fabric of Polish society and culture and cooperated with non-Jews in their shaping. The employment of the concept of similarity, however, could overcome the Jewish and non-Jewish dualism.

**THE CONCEPT OF SIMILARITY**

“Similarity” is a fairly new heuristic instrument, even though studies that treat the concept of similarity were conducted in Africa and India in the 1990s.16 Moreover, the similarity model has played a significant role in the field of philosophy. Until recently,
however, this concept had not gained widespread interdisciplinary attention. Currently, this seems to be changing due to research conducted in the last couple of years, in particular at the University of Tübingen by Dorothee Kimmich and in collaboration with Anil Bhatti (New Delhi).\(^{37}\)

The crux of the similarity model lies in its challenge to the binarism of identity and difference. According to the theorists of similarity, this binary not only shapes structuralist and poststructuralist theories, but it can also be located, albeit in attenuated form, in cultural studies research on postcolonialism, multiculturalism, and even hybridity.\(^{19}\) The similarity model instead introduces the category of both-and-one, which withdraws from the traditional polarization of authenticity and foreignness.\(^{39}\)

Thinking in terms of similarity orients us toward cultural overlapping rather than borders and demarcations. The orientation toward this kind of interrelationship is anything but unusual; rather, it is characteristic of various cultural studies approaches. At its root, it traces cultural exchanges and points of contact between individuals and/or various groups.\(^{40}\) Yet, despite the emphasis on cultural congruities, according to the pioneers in the field of “similarity,” the dichotomous juxtaposition of the self and the foreign nevertheless persists.\(^{41}\) The similarity model attempts to avoid this dichotomous juxtaposition by understanding spheres of cultural contact not as a space that two or more groups—conceived of at least implicitly as distinct—negotiate jointly; instead, they are merely a condition under which connectivity can be perceived. In this context, similarity represents a situational experience for which the self and the other do not form points of references. Similarity “arises in the eye of an observer and is contingent, ephemeral, unpredictable.”\(^{42}\) The concept of similarity thus requires, vis-à-vis other cultural studies approaches, a “changing of perspective.”\(^{43}\) In a concrete sense this entails a new approach to and a new understanding of cultural overlapping.

Similarity not only emphasizes the connections between Jews and non-Jews, but also allows for discussion of divisions and differences. These do not, however, form profound and fundamental differences, but rather vague and blurred dissimilarities, which emerge in different shades.\(^{44}\) Contrary to other theoretical approaches, similarity thus makes it possible to abolish Jewish/non-Jewish dualism without simultaneously erasing differences.\(^{35}\) The identification of similarities releases Jews from their foreignness without robbing them of their distinctiveness. An examination of similarities between Jews and non-Jews thus does not displace their mutual distinctiveness.\(^{46}\) Similarity is solely intended to remove the idea of a deeply anchored and seemingly fixed otherness of Jews.

In conclusion, it remains to be asked what sources inform us about experiences of similarity. If they are elusive and bound to the moment, where can researchers make them out and how can historians get a hold on them? In the following, I wish to list
three different historical sources. The first kind of material contains “classical” sources, such as autobiographies and memoirs. They sometimes describe situations of a deeply sensed Jewish and non-Jewish connectivity. A paradigmatic example of such a memoir was drafted by Salomon I. Horowitz, a Galician Jew, and published in Lwow in 1909. In his text, Horowitz recounts his experiences during his travels in Eastern Europe. In one passage he narrates his impressions of Jewish life in Lithuania where, as he writes, a sense of togetherness between Jews and the non-Jewish rural population seems to have been extant for centuries. According to Horowitz, these largely harmonious relations find expression in people’s interactions at Jewish taverns. Non-Jewish peasants and their families regularly frequent them on their way to the weekly markets. The Jewish innkeeper, his wife, and children heartily welcome the non-Jewish guests, with both parties radiating genuine joy over the reunion and exchanging gifts for the children.47 Any sense of religious or cultural differences appear to be nonexistent or are at best secondary.

A similar feeling of Jewish and non-Jewish interrelatedness is conveyed by the memoir of Dov Ber Birkenthal (1723–1805), a Jewish businessman in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and, after the partitions of Poland, Habsburg Galicia. Birkenthal draws a vivid picture of his many contacts with non-Jews. Whereas most of these encounters are marked by religious or ethnic indifference, some of them bespeak mutual mistrust, even aversion, and a few develop into close friendship. Birkenthal thus experiences a wide range of sensations toward Gentiles; they range from dislike, and even detestation, to intimacy. What feeling actually prevails depends on the character of the individual and not on the person’s ethnic or religious belonging. Some Jews, Birkenthal reports, cheated and betrayed him, and he indeed loathes them, whereas he feels much togetherness with other Jews as well as various non-Jews. For the author, there are no clear Jewish and non-Jewish boundaries when it comes to socializing.48

The second category of documents consists of so-called ephemeral sources, such as anecdotes. Usually, historians give them little, if any, attention, either because they mostly speak only indirectly to us, that is, must be contextualized through meticulous and painstaking work before they might make sense; or because their informative content frequently does not fit into mainstream narratives and is therefore considered irrelevant. This was the case, for example, with a brawl that took place in Vienna’s city center in December 1896. A Jewish peddler who tried to hawk his wares on the street provoked the ire of an employee of a nearby store. In order to scare him away, the non-Jewish employee started hurling abuse at the Jew, and then attacked him physically. Up to this point, the incident neatly corresponds to the historical narrative of the difficulties faced by Jewish peddlers in eking out an existence in antisemitic Vienna. Yet, the occurrence took an unexpected turn at odds with prevalent narratives of Jewish and non-Jewish relations in the Habsburg capital. Non-Jewish passersby came to the
aid of the Jew and severely beat the aggressor. They thus displayed compassion toward a person in distress, irrespective of his religious or ethnic belonging. At this moment, non-Jews present at the scene felt more solidarity with the Jewish peddler than with the non-Jewish employee.

The third category of sources from which scholars may retrieve examples of perceived similarity are given historical accounts that must be “read against the grain.” Thereby, some of the records that form the basis of the historical narrative may need to be reinterpreted. One example of such a reinterpretation concerns a brief description of a football match between the Jewish team Hakoah and its non-Jewish opponent Brigittenauer A.C. in Vienna in the 1920s. The spectators comprised both Jews and non-Jews. Many of the latter had a stake in Hakoah’s win and tried to support the team by loud whooping. There was a problem, however, as they did not know how to spur on the Jewish players in a friendly manner. One of the spectators finally shouted “Hoppauf, Herr Jud.”

So far, scholars have understood this episode as an indication of the Jewish/non-Jewish divide in Vienna of the 1920s. Non-Jews apparently did not even know how to address Jews in a nonaggressive manner. Yet, the incident can also be interpreted in a different way, namely as an instance of relatedness between the non-Jewish onlooker and a Jewish player. It is a situational experience that lasts only for the moment. But in this instant, the sensation of connectivity bridges Jewish and non-Jewish boundaries and concomitantly demonstrates the untenability of a binary categorization. Differences in fact remain, as the shouting of “Herr Jud” as a form of address indicates. However, these differences are not necessarily fundamental. “Similarity,” in other words, may help to overcome the Jewish and non-Jewish binary ingrained in Jewish historiography, and thereby open up historical narratives to new readings.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The research for this article was funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), grant P31036-G28.

NOTES

8. A copy of the review can be found among my private papers, and I am happy to make it available to anybody wishing to request it.
15. Ibid., 3–4.
25. Teter, “There should be no love,” 250.
28. Teter, “There should be no love,” 261.
29. Teter, “There should be no love,” 249–270.
31. This holds true for other regions in Europe, but also in North Africa and the Middle East, as well. See S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society. The Jewish Communities of the World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Genizah*, vol. IV: Daily Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Jacob Goldberg, “Poles and Jews in the 17th and 18th Centuries: Rejection and Acceptance,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte...*


35. The question of how non-Jewish culture can be defined and what it encompasses, as I wish to argue, is impossible to answer. Part of this difficulty stems from societies’ heterogeneity and their cultural pluralism. This proves particularly true with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The non-Jewish population consisted of Armenians, Germans, Poles, Ruthenians, and other groups, and each of them claimed to possess its distinct cultural profile. Vilna represents a particularly salient example of a culturally diverse city. It was home to five Christian confessions. In addition, there were Muslim Tartars and, as a matter of fact, Jews. See for example David Frick, “Jews in Public Places: Further Chapters in the Jewish-Christian Encounter in Seventeenth-Century Vilna,” *Polin* 22 (2010): 215. In this context, it is unfeasible to circumscribe the non-Jewish culture to which Jews assumedly acculturate.


41. Dorothee Kimmich describes the preservation of dualistic categories, stating that cultural studies scholars “basically (wish to) address and resolve a self-made problem . . . but in doing so remain comparatively subcomplex.” See Kimmich, *Ungefähre*, 13.


43. Ibid., 171.


45. For this point, see Rosman, *How Jewish Is Jewish History*, 4.


