



David N. Myers. *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought.* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003. xi + 253 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-11593-1.



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The Content of “Historicism”

The subtitle of David N. Myers’s well-written, detailed and nuanced analysis of the anti-historicist arguments German-Jewish intellectuals put forward in the Kaiserreich and the Weimar Republic alludes to Sigmund Freud’s famous essay, “Das Unbehagen in der Kultur” (“Civilization and Its Discontents”). Indeed, the current director of the UCLA Center for Jewish Studies and expert on Jewish and European intellectual history interprets the “crisis of historicism” and the anti-historicist anxieties of the protagonists of his study as part of a larger dissatisfaction with the “ills of modernity.” This discontent was deeply rooted in the nineteenth century and reached its peak in the 1920s (pp. 3, 170-171). Despite his over-arching, religiously motivated aim of exploring the tensions between history and faith (p. 11), Myers’s book offers historicism at its best: focusing on Hermann Cohen (1842-1918), Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929), Leo Strauss (1899-1973), and Isaac Breuer (1883-1946), he carefully scrutinizes the cultural and intellectual milieus in which their anti-historicist ideas arose and how they evolved over time due to the constant “negotiation, mediation, and translation” (p. 164) between these important thinkers as well as the exchange with other

central figures of German intellectual life of their time.

According to Myers, historicism poses a problem and a challenge for religion and faith up to the present, because its general methodological demand “to place the single event in context and then link it to a chain of other contextually bound events” (p. 5) denies the possibility of the transcendent meaning of historical facts and erodes the difference between the sacred and the profane. In their history, Jews had been used to living in two different temporal realms: one was of divine origin and structured by the ritual calendar and the other was ordered by the gentile calendar of the political, social, and economic world. In the nineteenth century, however, the emerging, philologically informed *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, which was founded by Leopold Zunz, and the attempts to narrate the history of the Jews-like Heinrich Graetz’s eleven-volume magnum opus-gave way to questions concerning the divine origins of the tradition because they historically contextualized the “seemingly timeless rabbinic figures” (pp. 21-28).

In the late nineteenth century, many German intellectuals-like Friedrich Nietzsche in his second un-

timely meditation—criticized the dominance of historicism in intellectual culture and in the *Geisteswissenschaften* in particular. Among them, the neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen tried to preserve the autonomy of reason against its historicization (p. 61). In an excellent close biographical study, Myers develops the various aspects of Cohen’s thinking and portrays him—following Gangolf Hübinger’s notion of *Kulturprotestantismus*—as a Jewish Culture Protestant who firmly believed in the closeness and affinity of German (i.e. Protestant) and Jewish cultures and traditions (p. 48). It is important to notice that Cohen was far from abandoning history. Rather, as Myers argues convincingly, he sought to transform history into an auxiliary science of a larger prescriptive (philosophical) project. In other words, “Cohen was attempting to rescue history from the debilitating features of historicism itself” (p. 51).

In contrast to his mentor Hermann Cohen, with whom he was in close connection between 1913 and 1918, Franz Rosenzweig regarded not only historicism but also the neo-Kantian academic philosophy of his teacher as obstacles to leading a good and religiously fulfilled life. Like other young German and Jewish philosophers at the beginning of the twentieth century, he was driven by an “experiential yearning,” incorporating vitalistic and existentialist language into his thinking (pp. 72-73). In the strongest sections of his book, Myers carefully reconstructs the cultural milieu in which this longing for an existential and religious renewal arose. This longing was shared by the Protestant theology of crisis, as seen in the dialectical theology of Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Friedrich Gogarten, and Emil Brunner (pp. 94-103). In order to reach spiritual renewal, they wanted to abandon the “fragmenting methods and mundane causal schemes of historicism” (p. 98). As a substitute, Rosenzweig attempted to construct an ahistorical path and identity for the Jewish people from the Archimedian standpoint of revelation.

The other two authors examined by Myers shared Rosenzweig’s “yearning for the immediacy of experience” in the 1920s and therefore tried to resist historicism. Myers analyzes the “godfather of American neo-conservatism” Leo Strauss and the lesser known “agitator and activist” Isaac Breuer in the context of the so-called “conservative revolution.” Both attacked liberalism and enlightenment rationality, and favored a new religious orthodoxy. With respect to his own analysis, Myers highlights three common elements of their thinking: first, they conceived of a “theological-political crisis”; second, they regarded historicism as an important fac-

tor contributing to this crisis; and third, they repudiated Zionism as a solution to the crisis—even though Breuer later changed his mind (p. 109). While Strauss formulated the intellectual critique, but never actually upheld the strict religious faith and obeyed the law, Breuer developed a sense of messianism at the end of the First World War and advocated a new orthodoxy and a renewed Jewish community.

Resisting History offers an impressive account of the varieties of anti-historicist arguments in German-Jewish thought from the beginning of the *Kaiserreich* until the end of the Weimar Republic. Its case studies are careful and nuanced reconstructions of the world-views of central intellectual figures of the time. Avoiding big labels and catchwords, Myers keeps his analysis open to the specific appropriations of certain ideas, the alterities, and the paradoxes within the thinking of his protagonists. A particular merit of his analysis is the way in which he repudiates the notion of “influence” and defies all attempts to find the “origin” of an idea. Rather, he tries to scrutinize the various ways in which ideas changed when communicated, translated, and appropriated. Myers develops the implications of this method in greater detail in the concluding section of his book.

To my mind, the method has its most fruitful effects in those parts of the book where Myers broadens the perspective and tries to describe not only individual thinkers but cultural and intellectual milieus. In the most interesting sections of his book he compares the longing for a religious renewal that permeated Jewish and Protestant theology at the beginning of the twentieth century and after the First World War. Due to his focus on individual thinkers and their attitudes toward historicism, however, these remarks can only be sketchy. The high currency which the ideas of spiritual or even mystic experience and religious community gained among Jews, Protestants—and one can add even Catholics[1]—during that time period would demand a much broader and at the same time more detailed examination. This is hardly a criticism of Myers, who deliberately wants to write the histories of great German-Jewish intellectuals. However, it points out the limits of this traditional style of intellectual history: even if it is carried out in such an excellent way, as it is in Myers’s book, it fails to illuminate the broader discursive formations and to explain their changes.

Despite the general merits mentioned above, Myers’s book has several problems and limitations. To begin with, the notion of “historicism” to which My-

ers necessarily refers throughout his study of anti-historicism remains rather vague. Neglecting almost the whole German debate on historicism from Herbert SchnÄdelbach to Otto Gerhard Oexle and recent comprehensive volumes about the meaning of the term, its relevance in German history, and its opponents,[2] Myers works with a rather rudimentary concept that Calvin Rand developed in 1965. According to this view, historicism can mean either a method that studies “each person, event, nation or era as a unique individual” or an overarching ideology that “values the past on its own terms” (p. 19). Even if this definition captured the various meanings of historicism—Myers seems to think that the second part of the definition is essentially the same as Troeltsch’s “historicization of all our thinking and perception,” which it is not—it still remains unclear throughout his study to what exactly the authors reacted when they assumed antihistoricist positions. Since Cohen and Rosenzweig tried to rescue history from historicism it must have been the ideology of historicism, as Myers explicitly says, but what are the precise elements of this ideology and who actually expressed it?

This lack of precision with respect to the notion of historicism—which, as the recent German debate suggests, might perhaps be better abandoned from historiographical thinking—leads to two further points of criticism. First, the element that unites Myers’s German-Jewish intellectuals (and according to him even religious thinkers today) is a fear of a loss of faith, of a destruction of eternal truths, and of unequivocal religious sentiment. The historical contextualization of religious sources, however, is only one factor causing this anxiety. Consequently, Myers describes his protagonists’ reactions to the dominance of modern science, the rule of rationalism, the loss of religious communities and immediate spiritual experience in the modern world. Unless the relationship between these factors is clear, the roles of historicism and anti-historicism remain elusive. This problem, again, would be an argument for a broader

perspective that compares the ways different religions dealt with these features of modern industrialized societies. Such an analysis, secondly, should avoid simple causal relations between modernity, its ills and/or crisis, and the yearnings for a religious renewal, as Myers implicitly suggests them. Reading his study, one gets the impression that Cohen, Rosenzweig, Strauss, and Breuer simply gave voice to an objective crisis or reacted to it. Such a perspective, however, neglects the tendency that crises are essentially constructed in historical narratives and overlooks the contribution of these and many other German intellectuals to the production of the sense of crisis that permeated the political-cultural discourse in Germany especially in the 1920s.

I would like to recommend “Resisting History” as an interesting and thought-provoking read even for those who do not share the author’s religiously motivated research interest in examining the relationship between history and faith. Ultimately, I did not feel the need for the “consolation” Myers wants to offer at the end of his book by saying that, at least, we are not alone in our “despair” in the “clutches of historicism” (p. 172): Why should we worry that history might be the only game in town as long as it is fun and provides us with interesting books to read?

Notes

[1]. Alois Baumgartner, *Sehnsucht nach Gemeinschaft: Ideen und StrÄmungen im Sozialkatholizismus der Weimarer Republik* (Munich and Paderborn: SchÄrningh, 1977).

[2]. See, for example, Herbert SchnÄdelbach, *Geschichtsphilosophie Nach Hegel. Die Probleme des Historismus* (Freiburg and Munich: Karl Alber, 1974); Otto Gerhard Oexle, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeichen des Historismus* (GÄttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1996); Wolfgang Bialas and Gerard Raulet, eds., *Die Historismusdebatte in der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang Publishing, 1996).

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