



**Klaus Hödl, ed.** *Der "virtuelle Jude": Konstruktionen des Jüdischen*. Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2005. 157 pp. EUR 19.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-7065-1994-6.

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**Published on** H-German (April, 2008)

## Pick and Mix on "Jewish Identity"

"Konstruktionen," "(virtuelle) Identität," "Authentizität," "Gedächtnispolitik"—this essay collection offers snippets of recent discussions on identity while debating what being Jewish has meant in Europe over the past two hundred years. It aims to introduce the insights of cultural and postcolonial studies to Jewish studies and adopts approaches which vary from dogged deconstruction in Klaus Hödl's "Der 'virtuelle Jude'—ein essentialistisches Konzept?" to light-hearted irony in Stefan Krankenhagen's "Humor als Rolle: Zur Kunst von Anna Adam." These disparate methods are complemented by an almost disconcertingly broad spectrum of topics. As the title suggests, the volume as a whole is understood as a reply to Ruth Ellen Gruber's *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe* (2002), a study of the boom in Jewish or "Jewish-style" culture in eastern Europe largely promoted by non-Jews since the fall of the Iron Curtain. However, Gruber's theses are not put to a systematic test here, and the collection's historical scope is broader than her book's focus on the 1990s.

Hödl has not attempted to impose a consensus on his contributors as to the status of "authentic" Jewish identity, a concept that Gruber seems to endorse and Hödl clearly does not. So many different interpretations of "virtual" Jewishness are investigated here, moreover, that the concept is stretched to a point where it ceases to impart overall coherence to the volume, in comparison with Gruber's very specific use of the word. Nevertheless, the volume offers many other points of illuminating thematic cohesion, all the more striking considering its wide spectrum of topics—from economic history

to the development of the historical novel, from stereotypes of Walter Rathenau to installation art in twenty-first-century Germany. Furthermore, whatever the differences between the contributors' attitudes to Jewish identity per se, the volume offers important general conclusions, which, once again, its variety of subject matter and method serves to illustrate convincingly. For example, it shows that too many assumptions and not enough detailed research still underlie our understanding of "Things Jewish" and their history in Europe.[1] Perhaps even more importantly, it also illustrates how treating "Jewish" history separately from "German" and "Polish" history leads to distortion. These and other underlying themes could have made for better section subtitles than those used, which hinder assessments of the volume's contents and scope.

The majority of essays are very specialized while often also offering thought-provoking introductions to key aspects of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. For example, Dirk Rupnow, in "Die nationalsozialistische Konservierung des Jüdischen und unsere Erinnerungskultur," gives an overview of official and unofficial strategies of remembrance in the Third Reich and the Federal Republic, provocatively suggesting that National Socialist appropriation of Jewish artifacts and cultural legacy shares more with post-1945 modes of remembrance than we might like to admit. The following essay, Ingo Loose's "Das Bild 'des Juden' in der Historiographie zur NS-Wirtschaft im deutsch-polnischen Vergleich" provides another instance of parallels, whether conscious or subconscious, between National Social-

ist treatment of the Jews and their subsequent treatment by economic historians as *Fremdkörper* (p. 26). Loose shows how this situation is further exacerbated when applied to Nazi-occupied Poland, where the Jews and their economic fate fall between multiple stools: “Für die wirtschaftshistorische Forschung in Deutschland drängt sich der Eindruck auf, dass ... einerseits nach dem Territorialprinzip heutiger Grenzen verfahren wird, wobei das Schicksal der Hunderttausenden Enteigneten, Entrechteten, der Millionen Zwangsarbeiter in Osteuropa, aber auch in den anderen besetzten Gebieten Europas nach wie vor Sache einiger weniger Spezialisten ist und darüber hinaus – was beunruhigender ist – in der öffentlichen Erinnerung praktisch keine Rolle spielt” (p. 34).

“Opferkonkurrenz” (p. 30) and the division of history into national(ist) blocks recur throughout the volume as contributing factors to the comparative paucity of satisfactory studies on Europe’s Jews (see also Agnieszka Pufelska’s essay on “Das Feindbild ‘Judäo-Kommune’ als Kraftquell für den polnischen Kampf gegen den Kommunismus”). What is missing above all from economic history, according to Loose, are the strategies and actions of individual Jews, who are all too often represented as a legalistic block or collective victim. Although restitution cases and research into the role of big companies have brought about changes since the 1990s, these developments should not, he insists, replace academic research or public remembrance and responsibility.

The most detailed criticism of Gruber’s concept of “virtual Jewishness” comes in Hädler’s own essay “Der ‘virtuelle Jude’ – ein essentialistisches Konzept?” Although Gruber is concerned with the commercialization of Jewishness and Shoah tourism in particular historical constellations, and not at all with theoretical identity discourse, Hädler is naturally justified in questioning her terms. On the other hand, he does seem to misread her at times. She does not set out to prove or discuss the existence of an “authentic” Jewish identity, and often sets this and other potentially problematic notions (“real Jews,” “goyish”) in quotations, indicating that she is well aware of the minefield she is crossing. It would of course be difficult to discuss the phenomena she sets out to investigate without using some abbreviations, and she defines her idea of “virtually Jewish” at great and satisfying length. Whether or not one concurs with her on the importance of “living” memory to cultural identity is another matter. Hädler is so intent on deconstructing her suggestion that there can be such a thing as an organic cultural legacy that he somewhat loses sight, in his own contribution

at least, of the very valid question of what difference it makes that there are now so few Jews (or even “Jews”) living in Europe as compared to previous centuries: “Die Annahme, dass vor der Shoah aufgrund des Vorhandenseins eines ‘lebendigen jüdischen Milieus’ statt Virtualität Authentizität bestimmend gewesen sowie der Geschichtsbezug weniger durch Bedürfnisse motiviert, sondern durch Rückgriffe auf Erinnerung hergestellt worden sei, ist ... zu hinterfragen. Konstruktionen sind immer schon mit historischen Deutungen einhergegangen, sie stellen kein Phänomen allein der Gegenwart dar” (p. 60).

Gruber’s subtitle alone, in its inclusion of the term “reinvention,” already suggests that her concept of virtuality could be fruitfully reconciled with Hädler’s more exacting take on identity politics, and indeed, this happens in other essays in the volume. A particularly successful example is Susanne Schönborn’s discussion of Jewish identity constructions in the 1984/85 Fassbinder debate (“‘Juden reden über Gefühle, und die anderen über Kunst’”). The author opens by considering the implications and pitfalls of talking about collective identity, in a well-referenced overview of recent discussion. The following case study is carefully contextualized in terms of both past and future. Schönborn’s take on “kommunikatives” versus “kulturelles Gedächtnis” offers an approach which could subsume both Hädler’s and Gruber’s: to her, the most important thing is the *perceived* generational change in mid-1980s Germany from lived to cultural “memory,” and the highly emotional quality of this process. She presents this as one of the main outputs of the Fassbinder debate for Jews and Germans alike, narrowing in once again on one of volume’s core themes: “Es ging im Laufe der Fassbinder-Debatte immer mehr um die Frage, ob es eine gemeinsame Verständnissbasis gebe, auf der sich Juden und Nichtjuden über den Umgang mit der deutsch-jüdischen Geschichte während des Holocaust und über die Rolle, die dieser Geschichte in der bundesrepublikanischen Gesellschaft zukomme, einigen könnten. Dabei offenbarte die Debatte, dass der Holocaust nur von wenigen als Teil deutsch-jüdischer Geschichte verstanden wurde. Zumeist wurde der Holocaust entweder nur als deutsche Geschichte oder nur als jüdische Geschichte diskutiert” (p. 110).

The difficulties of writing about collective identity are evident elsewhere in the volume, although they are not always so clearly thematized. One particular problem, evident also in Gruber’s book, is the idea of an “innenjüdisch” perspective on matters Jewish as being es-

essentially different from an outside perspective. The question of which Jewish community is being used to define this “internal” Jewish perspective is not always addressed directly. In these cases, as Hildegard Fröhlich points out in her interesting essay on the after-life of the painter Max Liebermann, this position can all too often become synonymous with a Zionist perspective. Even when the difficulties of representing a group are the subject of analysis, as in Robin Ostow’s “Longing and Belonging—Home and Exile: The Jewish Museum in Vienna: An Anti-Heimat Museum? Or a Heimat Museum with an Accent?”, the author himself does not always manage to avoid the pitfalls he sketches. This essay is the only one in English, and seems in some respects to contradict Hödl’s view of Vienna’s original Jewish Museum, founded in 1895. Although Hödl’s editorial introduction to the volume prepares the reader for its differences of opinion, it is nonetheless a little irritating that the issues and examples at stake here are exactly the same that Hödl criticizes in Gruber’s book, in particular as regards Isidor Kaufmann’s “Gute Stube” installation. Ostow concludes that the pre-1938 museum was made for Jews by Jews, suggesting that it worked by tapping into that “living memory” that Hödl wishes to debunk. Furthermore, Ostow sees today’s museum as driven by the same “desire” that Gruber divines in “virtual Jewishness”: “Established by Jews in Vienna for Jews, the pre-war Jewish Museum articulated the voice of the successful Jewish middle classes close to the organized Jewish community. The Jewish Museum of the City of Vienna, by contrast, expresses the longing of the Second Republic and of the city to have a Jewish population that feels ‘at home’ in Vienna” (p. 79).

The volume therefore intensifies rather than resolving the tensions apparent in Gruber’s book between the claims of living memory and those of cultural construction. The concluding essay by Stefan Krankenhagen, “Humor als Rolle: Zur Kunst von Anna Adam,” takes issue with Gruber once again, although this time in a positive vein. He welcomes her optimistic take on the op-

portunities afforded by “Jewish style” culture in Europe in contrast to Bernard Wasserstein’s *Europa ohne Juden. Das europäische Judentum seit 1945* (1999) in which the author warns against assimilation as the death knell of “authentic” Jewish culture in Europe. In contradiction to Hödl, Krankenhagen sees a very clear difference between the “virtual” Jewishness of the nineteenth century and that of today: in contrast to the “ungebrochene Direktheit” of Jewish tradition before 1945, Jewish identity is now almost entirely symbolic in his eyes, meaning that stereotypes and appropriation are on the one hand free to run riot and on the other more likely to end up stuck in a rut. His discussion of Anna Adam’s work illustrates the practical problems of those culturally active in this highly contested and rarefied area. She takes the whole debate to consciously ridiculous extremes in her installation series “Feinkost Adam” (which includes trashy Jewish souvenirs and bottled Jewish breath), the reactions to which illustrate in their turn the extremes identity discourse can reach in all seriousness. After her exhibition at the Jewish Museum in 4th in 2002, the president of Nuremberg’s Jewish Community made the following statement: “Es mag ja sein, dass Frau Adam biologisch Jüdin ist, aber von Herzen ist sie es nicht. Wir offiziellen Juden müssen die religiösen Gefühle der echten Juden schätzen” (p. 147).

This final essay brings the discussion of identity constructions up to date, while showing that it is never-ending in its interplay of “within” and “outside,” of *Zuschreibung* and *Ausgrenzung*. As a whole, the volume is illustrative of how these issues require continual debate, the careful definition of terms, and detailed research on individual case studies. It contributes in this way to the diversification of methodologies and topics within Jewish studies.

#### Note

[1]. Ruth Ellen Gruber, *Virtually Jewish. Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 8.

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**Citation:** Deborah Holmes. Review of Hödl, Klaus, ed., *Der “virtuelle Jude”: Konstruktionen des Jüdischen*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. April, 2008.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14437>

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