



**Misha Klein.** *Kosher Feijoada and Other Paradoxes of Jewish Life in São Paulo.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012. xiii + 256 pp. \$74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3987-9.

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## **Ethnic and Racial Purities and Impurities: The Challenge of Being Jewish in Contemporary Brazil**

In Brazil, the field of Jewish studies has recently experienced a significant change in its analytical assumptions. During the last two decades, new approaches have emerged which have moved away from both âmemorialization,â typical of the first generations who sought to register the history of Jews in the Brazilian Diaspora as if it were a history of another wandering people, and from studies that saw âevidenceâ of anti-Semitism everywhere in Brazil. New research, carried out especially in history, the social sciences, and literary criticism, has been increasingly interested in understanding the specifics of Brazilian society and culture as a sine qua non condition to seriously approach the field of Jewish studies in Brazil. Reversing the Old Worldâs typical analytical emphasis on binary oppositions—for example, assimilation/exclusion, insiders/outside, hegemonic culture/subordinated cultures, philo-Semitism/anti-Semitism—recent tendencies have opened new possibilities for representing Jews in the Brazilian cultural context. While in European modernity the Jewish experience of social interaction has been a source of anguish, subjective shattering, and vigorous regulation, in Brazil the emphasis on sociability in primary relations, which it should be emphasized are little regulated, is an invitation for the diluting of trauma and rigid differentiations.

It is important to note that Jewish studies in Brazil draws on questions raised in mainstream Jewish studies in international academic contexts. The connections

between the multiculturalism-driven themes present in cultural studies and the actual dimensions of the ways in which continually reinvented ethno-racial identities are expressed in the Brazilian context have formed the background to research in this area during the last two decades. In the case of studies about Jews in Brazil, the greatest challenge has been to decipher Brazilian culture, its languages, its enigmas, and its ambiguities, and to understand how Jews have become integrated in Brazilian society at different times. However, this task is not simple. The contribution of Brazilianists, especially U.S. scholars, to Jewish studies in Brazil has been notable in recent decades, although some have been less than sensitive to the impact and challenges that the Brazilian cultural universe imposes on Jewish studies in Brazil.

*Kosher Feijoada*, by Misha Klein, is representative of this new perspective which sees the paradoxes of the maintenance of Jewish identity in Brazil as a phenomenon that cannot be separated from either those of the Jewish Diaspora in the broadest sense or the ethno-racial paradoxes present in Brazilian society. It is a sensitive ethnography of the Jews of São Paulo (the largest Jewish community in Brazil) and the dilemmas they face in maintaining their ethnic particularity in a cultural context symbolically marked by discomfort with ethno-racial differentiations, or even more so, with threats to national hegemony. The intertwining of the sense of Jewishness and the sense of âBrazilianness,â in its var-

ious levels of meanings, translates the analytical challenge that Klein assumes in a dense ethnography of the São Paulo Jewish community.

The title of the book, *Kosher Feijoada*, originally Klein's doctoral dissertation, is emblematic of an improbable mix: the appropriation of the "impure," *feijoada* (the key ingredient of the recipe is pork), by the rules of purity *kashrut* (dietary laws). While, on the one hand, this braiding of "pure" and "impure" evokes for the non-Jewish world a type of Brazilianization of Jews who give in to the seduction of *feijoada*, on the other hand, for the Jewish world, it evokes the Jewification of the most important Brazilian cultural symbol, *feijoada*. In her ethnography, this interweaving is continually reinvented, through relations of Jews with Brazilian culture; through relations in the Jewish community, for example, between Ashkenazim and Sephardim; through the city of São Paulo and the microcosms it houses; through identity games between nation and transnationalism, or between races and ethnicities; or through social classes and the social inequality in which they are structured.

From the macro-city, São Paulo, to the micro-city, the Hebraica club (where she carried out her ethnography), Klein explores different layers of understanding this braiding, almost always highlighting the Jewish community and its institutions in a living process of the continual negotiation of identities, which interlinks different cultural and "racial" segments. *Kosher Feijoada* involves a direct dialogue with classical themes and cosmologies from Brazilian anthropology: racial relations, miscegenation, *feijoada*, the house and the street, Carnival, and domestic workers. Klein observes the formation of the Jewish-Brazilian identity, seduced and challenged by these questions.

In her first chapter, "Departure," Klein, through a direct conversation with anthropology and Jewish studies, defines the concepts and categories that she uses in her ethnography. In relation to Jewish identity, her greatest concern is to make even clearer the question of ambivalent belonging, which is at times guided by national ideology, at times by transnational values associated with the Diaspora, and sometimes by both. In this chapter, her focus, like that of many U.S. scholars who study Jews in Brazil, critically falls on the values associated with the myth of three races, the racially harmonious nation without prejudice which assimilates and integrates the "other" to the specificities of its ethno-racial dynamic. Her study is oriented by the following question: how can the expressions of Jewish identity with a transnational

vocation be understood in the middle of a national culture that wants to be at the same time inclusive and hegemonic?

However, it is in the comprehension of the impact of the symbolic and effective expressions of ethno-racial relations in Brazil on Judeo-Brazilian identity that is the major strength of Klein's study. For Klein, on the one hand, the possibility of Jews exercising multiple identities results from the fact that in Brazil there is a greater identity fluidity that does not demand exclusivity. On the other hand, there is an emphasis on Brazilianness and national belonging, which function as imaginary brakes on manifestation of the affirmation of differences. Nevertheless, a weakening of the emphasis on ethno-cultural purity or subordination to national hegemonic classes can be witnessed today. This identity ambivalence between Jewishness and Brazilianness makes Klein's study one that is not insulated in the field of Jewish studies; on the contrary, her study is an invitation for reflection about how the study of Jewish identities in Brazil can be shown to be a fertile and alternative path for the understanding of the strength of certain values and markers of Brazilianness.

Her ethnography was carried out by using participant observation and formal interviews with different individuals from the Jewish community of São Paulo (men and women, young and old, immigrants and third generation, rich and poor). The privileged locus of her research is the Hebraica social club, whose members are Jews of all types and backgrounds (it has around thirty thousand members). It is a club solely for Jews, but also increasingly it is referred to as a club for the São Paulo city's elite.

São Paulo was not chosen by chance. The history of Jews and the constitution of their strong community overlap with this megalopolis's modernization period over the twentieth century. The growth of São Paulo is also the growth of the immigrant communities that are part of it. This interlacing of the process of the urbanization of São Paulo with the development of immigrant communities produced a Jewish community with its own characteristics. To be a São Paulo Jew conjures a specific identity construction, which, for Klein, is a legitimate and relevant subject of her study.

What challenges the author and leaves her nervous, and seems to me to be her most important theme, is the way in which Jews and Jewish communities have contemplated and incorporated the racial question in Brazil. This is the topic of chapter 3, "Kosher Feijoada," which gives the book its title. Klein, in a relevant contribution

that helps to understand the diversity present in the Jewish community, enters more deeply into the racial question by proposing that racial relations in Brazil function as a metaphor for the relations between the Ashkenazim and Sephardim in São Paulo's Jewish community. Regarding the question of racial relations in Brazil, white and black are racial categories that do not necessarily make racial intermixing infeasible or impose rigid barriers against it. This is not rhetorical data. The ideology of Brazilian racial intermixing is corroborated by the 2010 census data which shows that 43 percent of the Brazilian population is mixed.

Ashkenazim and Sephardim are, in the universe of the Jewish community, two different "races," which, as in Brazilian society, have intermarried despite prejudice. However, there is a stronger barrier that the Jewish community rarely crosses and that Klein does not question deeply enough in the discourse of her informants: mixing with nonwhites of Brazilian society. While within the Jewish community marriage between "whites" (Ashkenazim) and "blacks" (Sephardim) is not a taboo, in wider society marriage between Jews (whites) and Afro-descendants (blacks), is almost nonexistent. In this aspect, it can be stated that Jews (Ashkenazim and Sephardim) act in the matrimonial market as a white elite. Is the almost total absence of intermixing between Jews ("whites") and blacks a question of social class or is it a racial question? Nevertheless, the national ideology that is cultivated and celebrated in Brazil is that Brazilians, because they mix easily, are considered one of the most tolerant peoples in the world. The irony is that, as Klein skillfully points out, "what is unique here is that the particular ideology in question is one that these Jews celebrate as being specially favorable to the inclusion of the Jews in the national landscape" (p. 82).

From this perspective, it is very common, as her informants stressed, for anti-Semitism to be seen as not being very effective in the Brazilian case, although in the chapter "Doubly Insecure," Klein's narrative slips into the classical themes of anti-Semitism: the imaginary Jew, abstract prejudice, etc. However, in addition to the belief shared by Brazilian Jews that Brazil is a racially tolerant country, leaving the ideological factor aside, there is also an effective barrier against racism: a specific law that punishes racial prejudice as a crime for which there is no bail. The little opening that the Jewish community has to the "outside" has been the subject of estrangement, but also of a certain type of curiosity, as if Jews were a socially integrated group, but one that was little available in the matrimonial market. Klein identifies exclusionary

practices of Jews that betray the Brazilian ideal of miscegenation, and for this reason they may activate a latent anti-Semitism.

Notwithstanding the sensibility of her arguments for a better understanding of the identity dilemmas present in Brazilian society, there is an aspect that seems to limit the reach of her analysis of Jews in São Paulo. The chapter "Doubly Insecure" falls below the analytical intentions of her study and is even somehow apart from her most fundamental points. Klein identifies two forms of insecurity among São Paulo Jews: urban insecurity (which is a common concern in the city, especially for elites) and international anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli insecurity. Without any great evidence in Brazil that can justify a feeling of terrorist-related insecurity among Jews, Klein looks to the case of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina attack in Argentina (the bomb explosion in the Argentinean Jewish Mutual Aid Association in 1994 which killed eighty-six people), a reference to an insecurity that affects all of Latin America. Such insecurity in relation to violence complicates Klein's claims about the unique dynamics of Jews in Brazil. If this dual insecurity exists in Brazil, it can be implied there is nothing that can differentiate Brazilian Jews from any other Jews living in large cities. Since Klein's analytic aim is to ascertain that even being transnational, Brazilian Jews experience the interweaving of constantly re-signified layers of cultural identity, which guarantees this group a specific appearance in Brazil, not found in other contexts, then this chapter negates her argument to some extent.

What is involved, however, is not the celebration of Jewish identity in Brazil for what it represents of the vitality of the process, even when counterpoised to Jewish identities generated in the Old World. While, on the one hand, the "massive" integration of Jews in Brazil can, in the contingent meeting with those from other cultures, enrich humanism, tolerance, and solidarity in relation to the wider society, on the other hand, it can also stimulate its closing, indifference, and orthodoxy. Klein's study is a clear contribution to rethinking the Jewish experience in Brazil as a phenomenon that involves adaptation, negotiation, and heterogeneity in terms of a "situational ethnicity," vis-à-vis the equally varied stimuli in the national context. "Situational ethnicity" reveals in practice the forms in which individuals negotiate and reform their various identities in accordance with the situations with which they are confronted.

Finally, Klein's study fills, although it does not exhaust, an important gap that deserves more attention in

the field of Jewish studies in Brazil. It brings about a greater dose of sensitivity to the rather unsystematic debate between blacks and Jews. This dialogue is of crucial importance in various ways: in a country with a slaveholding past, such as Brazil, the tragic dimension that modernity brought for both Jews and blacks must be better understood; the impact that the multiculturalist paradigm, increasingly influential in Brazil, has produced in the Jewish community and the black movements must be politically and sociologically assessed; and how affir-

mative action policies have resulted in an interesting debate about *âraceâ* and racialization and how this debate affects the way Jewish identity is incorporated in an increasingly biracial cosmology (whites and blacks) must be addressed.

Kleinâs study is an important starting point for a new sensitivity to identities that may reorganize the field of Jewish studies in Brazil with new questions, new themes, new sources, and new problems. For these reasons, I strongly recommend the reading of *Kosher Feijoada*.

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