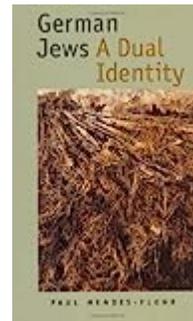


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Paul Mendes-Flohr. *German Jews: A Dual Identity.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999. xvi + 149 pp. \$18.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-07623-3.



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This richly documented book mounts a judicious critique of the deflationary theory of German-Jewish dialogue proffered by those, like Gershom Scholem, who suggest that “a studied optimism” among German Jews bolstered a naivete which “undercut their resolve to confront the harsh realities facing them.” (2-3, 91-92, 97-98, 139) In it Paul Mendes-Flohr qualifies the proposal that German Jews moved “beyond Judaism,” by exhibiting tentative negotiations which comprised their fraught identities.

Four elegant chapters show how Jewish Germans were conflicted between – and sought to reconcile – social and economic, ethnic and political, metaphysical and moral spheres. Conjuring Franz Rosenzweig’s image of a *Zweistromland* in which ancient Babylonian Jews thrived, Mendes-Flohr claims German-Jewish vitality was “nurtured by two sources: ... universal culture refracted through the German experience and imagination – and the traditional wisdom and spirituality of Judaism.” (xi, 64) The image of a fertile crescent where divergent streams of influence converge represents a blend that countervails the strict limits drawn by the *Yarden* which separates one side from the other. The essays map the cultural boundaries and political borders of German Jewry, charting frontiers and tracing cross-fertilizations.

Chapter one recalls good intentions and false moves that have characterized “The Bifurcated Soul of the German Jew” since the eighteenth century. Following Mosse, Sorkin, and Volkov, Mendes-Flohr construes assimilation and alienation as acculturation pursued for German citizenship and adherence required to sustain Jewish tradition. Since “a territorial or a political coding” proved inchoate for Germany (as opposed to, say, France), ethnic or cultural criteria dominated the self-understanding of Germans. (4-5) Jews who wanted to live as minorities in a neutral state were challenged even by liberal Germans who worried about competing loyalties. (17-18) German intellectual culture afforded, to my knowledge, no equivalent of an Emile Zola who lambasted the hypocrisy of conditional citizenship for Jews; likewise, the German military had no Jew ranking as highly as Captain Dreyfus. Whereas France had long established its political – if not cultural – unification, Germany by the end of the nineteenth century had only just established territorial and political unity, which would soon be outstripped by ethnic identifications along both its eastern and western “borders.” For specific historical reasons, then, “one may speak of a tragic ‘mismatching’ between Jews and Germans determined by differing ‘horizons of expectations,’” as in Mendes-Flohr’s apt citation of Martin Buber and Reinhart Koselleck. (15)

Jews who entered the *Bildungsbuergertum* embraced the ideal of *Bildung*, a process of intellectual expansion, aesthetic refinement, and moral aspiration. (5, 26) Discord between “social-political” and “cultural-epistemological” variants of *Bildung*, however, complicated their enthusiasm, as A. Assman has shown. (9) [1] Ultimately, Germans armed with Fichte and the Grimms abandoned eternal, universal *Bildung* for their own particular historical *Volknation*. As *Volk* outstripped *Bildung* at the turn of the century anti-Semitic vitriol spread despite Jewish support of the Fatherland. Even Hermann Cohen soured on the attempt to integrate *Deutschum* und *Judentum* noting “[our] trust has been broken.” (21) [2] By 1916 the neo-Kantian philosopher expressed hope that minorities would be protected under democracy. (113 note 92) Yet Germans mostly sought to preserve the ethnic purity of the Weimar Republic. To explain the contradiction, Rosenzweig identified the ambiguity of the “and” that both conjoins and distinguishes German “and” Jew. In less adequate renderings of German Jewish life by Moses Mendelssohn’s conciliatory separation of powers (more below) and Cohen’s dialectical mission of symbiosis as Mendes-Flohr writes on Rosenzweig’s behalf, “the valence of either side of the equation also change[d], but without altering an essential asymmetry.” (22-23).

Chapter Two examines the competing principles of “History and Kultur.” Viewing intellectual and social factors that defined and deformed German-Jewish identity, the chapter investigates the interplay between diversified roots in particular histories and elitist aspirations for world-culture. This helps demystify the flowering of German Jewish cultural productivity by setting it in social frameworks which explain the rapid yet unstable entry of Jews into the bourgeoisie more effectively than appeal to either Jewish “genius” or commercial aptitude. (33, 31)

With their embourgeoisement, German Jews learned they might earn a measure of respect from German society – but not win acceptance into it (27). Mendes-Flohr rightly claims the “propitious affinity ... between Judaism and German humanistic culture ... was not unambiguous” (34-35). Whether Jewish identity would survive in the ambit of the German remained uncertain. Assuming religious and cultural “differences may in fact nurture our humanity” rather than endanger it, some writers from Mendelssohn onward doubted whether “a neutral ‘high’ culture” indeed represented a “higher culture,” and feared that the variegation of historical peoples would be levelled by cultural progress. (37) Mendes-Flohr shows that Jews did not neutralize the value of history for *Kultur*, but rather emphasized the contingencies of genealogy.

(38-39) And yet the historical specificity of Jews posed dangers. In 1822 a student of Hegel and a forerunner of *der Wissenschaft des Judentums* stated: “to merge is not to perish [aufgehen ist nicht untergehen].” (cited on 41) This likely sounded no worse than alternatives. For as Germans pursued a “more romantic, less cosmopolitan” *Bildung*, (41) efforts to promote distinctive Jewish life held out little more promise than compromising Judaism without eliminating it.

German Jews ventured a risk. Buber pointedly asked whether German Jews could “‘master ... the cultural admixture.’” (cited on 43) Mendes-Flohr’s reply seems affirmative. Were it not for their tragic decimation, he implies, Jews might not only have survived but flourished as Germans. The tribulations of dual-cum-hybrid identities devised by German Jews in the first decades of the last century propel the remaining essays.

Chapter Three illustrates bedeviling antinomies between the characterization of “The German-Jewish Parnassus” by Moritz Goldstein and the depiction of a “Juedische Renaissance” (beginning with Buber, it seems) by examining a poignant correspondence between two promising young intellectuals, Walter Benjamin and Ludwig Strauss. Reacting in 1913 to Goldstein’s controversial 1912 article, which broached the open secret that Jews administered “the spiritual property of a nation which denies [their] right and ability to do so,” Strauss and Benjamin debated the meaning and value of Judaism from the perspective of German life (*pace* Rosenzweig’s view inside out, seeing Christianity from and for Judaism). (46) [3]

As the debate shakes out, Strauss inveighs in Buberian tones that (as Strauss puts it) if “the Jewish element ... will belong to the center of our lives,” it might enable Jews “to become something whole.” (cited on 55) For Strauss a dual identity revolves around two centers, like an ellipsis. Yet Benjamin doubts that one could (in his words) “bear in one’s soul both aspects of [this] bifurcated spirit,” since “an individual can only have one Schwerpunkt [focal point].” (cited on 51, 54) He favors instead a “*Zionismus des Geistes*” that can draw Jews into their “metaphysical destiny” as (in his words) “representatives of matters spiritual and intellectual” (53). While Benjamin lauds “radical ... esoteric ... Literatenjuden” (his terms) who tap a hidden source, Strauss opts for “exoteric” Jewish activity, helping his future father-in-law Buber establish *Der Jude* in 1916 (55-56). Ironically, whereas Strauss elevates Judaism and rejects (in his words) “hybrid individuals ... flushed with uncertainty,”

Benjamin mitigates Jewishness, likely appreciating Gustav Landauer's 1913 declaration: "I accept my complexity and hope to be even more many-sided than I am now aware of." (cited on 50, 43) Due to such contradictions, as Mendes-Flohr sums up, Hermann Cohen's proposed symbiosis of "Jewish messianism and German humanism," hardly "benighted," actually exhibits high degrees of "irony – and anguish – between the lines." (60)

Chapter Four, "Franz Rosenzweig's Eulogy for German Jewry," begins with the statement that "Franz Rosenzweig did not write a eulogy for German Jewry." (66) Rosenzweig died just over three years before the Jewish Renaissance ended abruptly in 1933. Yet Rosenzweig's appraisal of German Jewry, Mendes-Flohr argues, "serves as a mournful homage to a community destroyed before it could reach" its full potential. (24) As noted above, Rosenzweig criticized thinkers for conjoining Jew and German as if they related on separate but equal terms. As Mendes-Flohr nicely puts it, Mendelssohn's bifurcation of "obedience [in] ... ritual" that remained "distinct" from *Kultur* "dedicated to truth" effectively stripped the "metaphysical and epistemological distinctiveness of Judaism." (76) Cohen's *Wahlverwandschaft* conflated Jews and Germans with the "anthropological 'means'" that communicate "ethical monotheism" to the world. (80) Buber emphasizing the "national reality" of Jews, embraced a "pantheistic mysticism." (81) But Rosenzweig's own "elusive 'and' linking the bifurcated soul of the German Jew" gave up compromise and decisiveness for a "creative tension." (84) Insofar as Jews "prefigure an absolute, redeemed reality beyond ... history," following Mendes-Flohr's perceptive interpretation of Rosenzweig, they cannot be "compared, much less harmonized" with any non-Jewish ethnic heritage and political affiliation. (83)

Only "the re-centering of the Jew in Judaism" through organs like the *Freies Juedisches Lehrhaus* enable a specifically Jewish inheritance within and beyond-and not just alongside-the participation of Jews in world-historical cultures, according to Rosenzweig. (86) While the lack or fullness of the other dimension must remain asymmetrically lower or higher than any single one's point of view, for Rosenzweig, divinity would ultimately encompass this difference. For the reality "constituted by God's revelation ... reaches its destination, redemption, by traversing and hallowing creation" in its manifold natural and cultural formations, conflicting political institutions and divergent ethnic lineages. (85) Rosenzweig thus reconciles the split in a highly controversial manner.

The "Epilogue" reconsiders the situation in 1933. Far from the "delusive fantasy" of a German 'and' Jewish dialogue excoriated by Scholem, advocates of a Jewish Renaissance in Germany did not imagine the 'and' as "a hyphen fusing different cultural identities but [as] a bridge granting easy, untroubled access to each of these distinct" components of their own identities. (90) As German Jews could not preclude the twin threats of fascism and isolationism, they justifiably maintained their fractured identities with misgivings. Without merging, the aspects of their identities competed and intersected as they were incorporated into multiply layered lives. Unprecedented forces terminated this experiment. (94) Elias Canetti's words – "Can't I still belong to all of [the nations], as before, and nevertheless be a Jew?" – conclude the book with bitter reminder that this tale of renaissance ended in devastation. I cannot determine whether this note sounds wistful or hopeful or both.

Without doubt the book contributes to literatures on modern identity and German Jewry. Its bibliographic details command attention; its precise judgments stimulate response. Mendes-Flohr helpfully shows how ethnic bonds and political decisions translate as ontological commitments and epistemological presuppositions. His treatment of personal identity, collective loss and mutual renewal is especially useful. Two examples illustrate its effectiveness. Mendes-Flohr's neat, if abbreviated, discussion of the significant role fashioned by liberal, literate Jewish women in the Wilhelmine era and Weimar Republic exhibits a remarkable confluence of talents and conditions that led such women to re-constitute the fraying edges of the Jewish community, exemplified in their positions as cultural facilitators independent of mainstream institutions (as, for instance, matrons of salons and university-educated teachers). (25-26) [4] This approach leads me to make a further connection which Mendes-Flohr does not state: Mendes-Flohr's moving rendition of a speech which Rosenzweig's cousin Rudi Ehrenberg delivered at Franz's and his wife Edith's 1920 wedding, in lieu of the groom's absent father's blessing, indicates that a rhetorical progenitor of Rosenzweig's more famous midrash in his 1923 letter to Buber, "The Builders" – "We have only to be sons in order to become builders" – surfaces in his cousin's prior remark: "We believe that one can proceed forward if – and only if – one first receives." (72) [5] In renewing the tradition, the centers of gravity shift between genders and generations – men to women, children to parents – and re-configure the terms of history, ideology and ritual: Recuperating fragments of their shattered identities, new centers of Ger-

man Jewry must reorient the tradition itself.

The only shortcoming of the book is its comparatively short length. Some pertinent evidence left unexamined includes Schoenberg's score of multiple identities caught between idolatry and iconoclasm in "Moses und Aron," and exiled thinkers, like Adorno and Benjamin, who yearned more or less for the Vaterland. Restricting his evidence to the years preceding 1933, Mendes-Flohr convincingly argues that German Jews had always been divided between social aspirations and ethnic attachments, historical diversity and cultural imperialism, which permitted no easy reconciliation. In this respect the book articulates a dilemma for the State of Israel, wherein Arab and Jew stand opposite – and apposite – each other: Will those social and cultural disparities (e.g., who are Israeli Arabs? Jewish Palestinians?) be divided by a Yarden or mixed in a *Zweistromland*?

The situation differs in North America. From where I sit in Silicon Valley, for instance, the Jewish condition resembles less the Babylonian or Davidic Empires than the Roman one. Located at a hub – not a source or a destination – of ethnic and political networks, the banks of this delta convey rich deposits arriving from and destined for other places. Not a dual, hyphenated identity but multiple, conflicting identifications raise flags. "United States Citizen" (political marker) and "Jew" (ethnic marker) are not as threatened or threatening as, say, markers or flags that stand for more sharply defined or marginal groups. Still, a viable response should find resources in "dialogues" about, by, and for German Jews. For the terms of "double-consciousness" (Du Bois), orthodoxy and heresy, core and limit, begin to respond to troubles of identity, by which we differentiate our selves from others, staking positions on and drawing lines along a politics of engagement and an aesthetics of opposition.

That said, the book effectively manages its emotional

debts, rigorous analyses, and hopeful proposals. Citing Arthur A. Cohen, Mendes-Flohr pronounces the aim to depict modern German Jewry in "the animate life of affections and passions" without excessive sorrow over its blindness or empty celebration of its brilliance. The effort succeeds in substance and style.

Notes

[1]. Aleida Assman, *Arbeit am nationalen Gedächtnis: Eine kurze Geschichte der deutschen Bildungsidee* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1993).

[2]. See Hermann Cohen, "Ein Bekenntnis zur Judenfrage" (1880) in *Der Berliner Antisemitismusstreit*, edited by Walter Boehlich (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1965), p. 126f.

[3]. See Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, translated by William W. Hallow (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1985), pp. 398-412, and passim.

[4]. A book worthy of mention in this regard is Marion Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class: Women, Family, and Identity in Imperial Germany* (New York: Oxford, 1991); for another view of women's hybridized Jewish identities, see Aron Rodrigue, *French Jews, Turkish Jews: the Alliance Israelite Universelle and the Politics of Jewish Schooling in Turkey, 1860-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana, 1990).

[5]. See Franz Rosenzweig, *On Jewish Learning*, edited by Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1955), p. 88; see also pp. 80-81.

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