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## Modernity and the Cities of the Jews

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## Modernity and the Cities of the Jews

by *Cristiana Facchini*

### Introduction

#### A journey through cities

At end of the 1920s, two brief travelogues were published, one shortly after the other. Joseph Roth's *Juden auf Wanderschaft* (Berlin, 1927) and Albert Londres' *Le Juif errant est arrivé* (Paris, 1930) both described the social, cultural and economic conditions of European Jews, particularly emphasizing the humiliating conditions of Eastern Jewry. Their gaze conveyed much of a "geography of despair," and in so doing it also attempted to promote awareness of the Jewish question among the European public.

This collection of articles is, to some extent, following in the footsteps of those travelogues, though with a different aim. First of all, our journey is meant to be a snapshot of Jewish culture through cities, but it also aims to depict a much more complicated picture of the interplay between modernity and Jewish culture. It tries to connect the perspective of time and the relevance of place in Jewish history, whilst underlining recurrent cultural patterns or significant differences amongst Jewish cultures of different periods and places. Both dimensions are relevant in order to better comprehend the response of Jews to the challenges brought about by the rise and spread of modernity. In doing so, we thought it might be enlightening to perform a sort of cultural pilgrimage through the cities that either are, or have been at some point, of great significance and relevance to the Jews.

Why cities? Because cities tell stories. Their streets and architecture are like the convolutions of a nautilus shell, a natural history of the living cultures that produced them. If modern European history is inextricably linked to the history of its cities, modern European Jewish history may also be reconstructed through the cities where Jews have dwelt.

The connection between cities and the Jewish people is deep and well documented. From ancient times, Jews found their way to the most important cities of the day. Even beyond the cities of the ancient Jewish commonwealth (the second Temple period), Jews concentrated

themselves in important cultural centers of the Mediterranean world, such as Alexandria and Rome. Their contribution to the history of Western culture is well understood, although work remains to be done on a more diverse cultural geography through the early modern period. Jews disappeared from some cities, leaving feeble traces; others bear witness to their presence through the ages.

Nevertheless, I would not underestimate the relevance of the dichotomy between town and countryside in Jewish history, especially during the modern period and with particular regards to certain areas of Europe, where urbanization was less rapid and where Jews settled predominately in small villages. Yet, whilst stressing the element of modernity, the city emerges as central and topical. Even more so when one tries to grasp the dynamics of Jewish culture, which was heavily influenced by the process of rapid or sudden change, be that of a political or an economic nature. Changes, both coercive or voluntary, affected Jewish lifestyles in visible and concrete ways, through the impact of migration and movement.

New methodological approaches have also appeared, mainly influenced by the “spatial turn,” which put more emphasis on themes and issues stemming from scholarly disciplines such as cultural geography, anthropology, urban studies, architecture and so forth.<sup>1</sup> Interest in Jews and cities had rapidly increased in the last decade, as suggested by panels and programmes in American and European universities.<sup>2</sup> In Germany, “Makom,” an interdisciplinary project launched by the University of Potsdam in 2001 and directed by Joachim Schlör, published a number of books and dissertations devoted to the relationship between space and Jewish Studies.<sup>3</sup> Urban scholars have also intensively worked, in these last years, on Jewish quarters and ghettos.<sup>4</sup>

Religious studies and theory of religions have also focused on the role of space within a specific religious system, or in comparing different contiguous religious systems. Such emphasis on space and place pays tribute to the seminal analysis of Emile Durkheim, who contributed greatly to the concept of the sacred and, therefore, of “sacred space.” Jews and cities could have been approached through different kinds of

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, “The New Spatial Turn in Jewish History. Essay Review”, *AJS Review* 33:1 (2009), 155–164.

<sup>2</sup> Joachim Schlör, “Jews and the Big City. Exploration on an Urban State of Mind”, in *Jewish Topographies*, eds. Julia Brauch, Anna Lipphardt, Alexandra Nocke (Burlington; VT: Ashgate, 2008), loc. 3, 121 ff. (kindle edition). See also, Joachim Schlör, *Das Ich der Stadt: Debatten über Judentum und Urbanität, 1822–1938. Jüdische Religion, Geschichte und Kultur*, Vol. 1, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, “The New Spatial Turn in Jewish History”, 157.

<sup>4</sup> See, works of Donatella Calabi mentioned in the article on Venice.

methodological approaches, such as the analysis of Jewish attitudes toward the organization of space, in order to understand how Jews shaped sacred and profane spaces in the cities of early modern Europe and later, after the legal Emancipation, in modern Europe.

As much evidence suggests, space and place were of primary relevance in the hierarchy of the sacred performed by the political elite of early modern cities. Ghettos and Jewish quarters were generally, though not exclusively, the result of a Christian hierarchical idea of the sacred that expressed itself through urban organization and the architecture of the city. “Spatial marginality” in early modern Europe played a pivotal role in addressing issues of religious nature. Nevertheless, even when the walls of the ghettos – which were mainly established in the Italian Catholic lands - were torn down, Jewish quarters did not disappear, they rather morphed following the path of economic modernization.

### **Modernity**

Our project focuses primarily on the relationship between Jews and modernity, using cities as a kind of lens to examine how Jews contributed to the development of modern European culture, and, conversely, how the cities of modern Europe shaped Jewish culture. We will examine cities that were pivotal in the story of modernity. Some of those cities have become landmarks in our thinking about the Jewish contributions to European culture. Others are still waiting to be rediscovered.

However, in order to grasp the idea that glues this collection of articles, it is necessary to mull over the definition and concept of “modernity.” Modernity can be defined in philosophical, economic, social, religious, and cultural terms. In order to simplify a very complicated concept, we will tease out a few of its defining features.

1. Modernity was a process that contributed to the rise of capitalism and industrialization, which in turn led to radical shifts in the landscape. Urbanization was its watchword. Migration from villages to cities deepened the clash between center and periphery. Migration from poorly developed countries to more advanced ones served to accelerate the forces of change. By the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, millions of Europeans had moved to the industrial cities of northern Europe and the new world. This dynamic urbanization is central to what we mean by “modernity.”

2. Modernity describes both a geographical displacement and an intellectual one. Modernity gave a prominent new role to science, often at the expense of traditional worldviews endorsed by religion. Religious orthodoxies were challenged by a new science-based assault on sacred traditions. Religions were forced into a confrontation with modernity, and either adapted or became more rigid. This hardening of belief

systems was met with an equal hardening of the forces opposed to belief as a cultural way of life. The most extreme case of this could be the Soviet Union, which made the “murder of religion” one of its founding tenets.

3. Modernity challenged, and eventually changed, the nature of the relationship between the individual and the state. The philosophical — and practical — separation of church and state, coupled with a new politics inspired by the concept of individual freedom, led to the creation of a new political entity: the “modern rational state,” to quote Weber, as well as a new concept of “citizenship” and the advent of “new Politics,” with increasing participation of masses into politics. Finally, the mass participation into politics.

One could also approach modernity through the analysis of chronological periods of various lengths. We opted, in this context, to look at a long period, placing the rise of modernity in the early seventeenth century. It is at the outset of this epoch that a cluster of attitudes reshaped the role of traditional thought and the relationship between religion and society, religion and new science, and religion and culture. Whilst being a period of great political and religious turmoil, this era also stands out as a key moment in the development of theories of religious tolerance, the rise and spread of a new science, and the circulation of new literary forms, such as the novel and the opera. All of which would further develop in the following centuries and become trademarks of modernity.<sup>5</sup>

From an economic and political perspective, the period in question witnesses the establishment of the absolutist monarchy, to the detriment of looser polities, and the emersion of the Atlantic trade, which would slowly supersede the Mediterranean one. Within this context Western Jewry reframed itself, following the path of mercantile routes.

### **Cities of the Jews**

The changing face of cities all across Europe reflected the profound impact of modernity on the culture and outlook of the Jews. Emigration, whether by mass expulsion or the pursuit of economic and religious freedom, was already a well established fact of Jewish life. Nevertheless, the scale of movement that took place between the eve of modernity and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was unique, not only in Jewish history, but also in the history of Europe.

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<sup>5</sup> “In several respects this moment in the late Renaissance can be seen as a kind of proto-Enlightenment, a foreshadowing of the cultural concerns of the eighteenth century.” See, Edward Muir, *The Culture Wars of the Late Renaissance. Sceptics, Libertines, and Opera*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), kindle editions, loc. 55-60.

The choice to include the seventeenth-century proved enlightening not only for the understanding of Jews in port cities and their growing role as a mercantile diaspora, but also for the understanding of Venetian Jewry and its contribution to modern culture. An examination of the roots of modernity in the seventeenth century suggests, of course, a focus on Amsterdam, the city that produced the most radical philosopher of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Baruch Spinoza. But the emergence of the Jewish community in Amsterdam invites to explore its links to Jewish Venice, which provided religious expertise and consultation. Jewish Venice is an especially interesting case, in part because of the prominent role of the Republic of Venice in the European imagination, which gave its Jews a broad influence beyond their ghetto walls. Furthermore Venice experienced, in the early decades of the seventeenth century, an intense period of anxiety which strongly influenced the configuration of a modern culture.<sup>6</sup> Within the background of this environment the city and its ghetto performed, as a my paper on Venice suggests, a significant cultural undertaking: the publication of two books which were destined to play a key role in the following decades and which strongly influenced new conceptions with regards to Judaism and its place in Christian society.<sup>7</sup>

One could suggest that it was in Venice, within the confines of the ghetto, that a theory of Jews as merchants, marked by utilitarian undertones was finally drafted. However, during the seventeenth-century, scholars and intellectuals from Europe, driven mainly by the interest in religion and rituals, payed a visit to the Venetian ghetto. Therefore, the paper also calls for an investigation into the ghetto both as a space and place capable of creating unique cultural and religious encounters.

In the early modern period port cities were deemed ideal for Jews. This collection of articles presents and discusses four different port cities in which the Jews played an important role in the economy.<sup>8</sup> Livorno, a port which was established at the end of the sixteenth-century and a city which soon became a special place for Jews, granting them more privilegese and autonomy than any other city within the Italian *paeninsula* one. Trieste and Odessa, port cities which were founded in the late eighteenth-century and which provided crucial services to their

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<sup>6</sup> The idea that modernity is the result of a period of deep anxiety dates back to the works of Paul Hazard and William J. Bouwmsa. See also, Muir, *The Culture Wars of the Late Renaissance*.

<sup>7</sup> The works I am referring to are: Leon Modena, *Historia de' riti bebraici*, (Venice: Calleoni, 1638); Simone Luzzatto, *Discorso circa il stato de gl'Hebrei*, (Venice, Calleoni, 1638).

<sup>8</sup> , David Cesarani ed., *Port Jews: Jewish Communities in Cosmopolitan Maritime Trading Centres, 1550-1950*, (London and Portland: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002).



respective empires. And finally Alexandria in Egypt, an interesting case-study which provides insight into the impact of modern cultural trends and the role of Jews beyond European boundaries.

With reference to scholarly debates over port cities, both Bregoli's article on Livorno and Catalan's article on Trieste offer new and critical insight, providing a more comprehensive awareness on the nexus between port Jews and the rise of modernity.

In regards to Livorno, Bregoli argues, in her accurate and detailed historical reconstruction, that "at the onset of 'modernity', the exceptional nature and economic system of Livorno, together with the long-standing conception of Livornese Jews as commercially useful, contributed to the preservation of traditional structures and norms and prevented the full application of enlightened equalizing policies championed by the Tuscan government."

Trieste is another fascinating case of a port city. The Jews of Trieste forged a peculiar cultural identity which bridged the worlds of Italy and the Habsburg empire. Trieste's port city was modelled after such cities like Venice and Livorno, where merchants with considerable trading networks were invited in order to launch and foster economic growth. These cities, especially in Catholic lands, did not exclusively host Jews, but they also were home to Armenians, Greeks, Slavs, Turks, Moors, Germans, and other "trading nations." All of these cities were somehow similar and yet very different. Their cultural outlook varied greatly: Livorno remained until the mid-nineteenth century a centre of Kabbalistic culture, both in dialogue and concert with north-African Jewish culture. Trieste's Jewish culture was definitely influenced by waves of maskilic ideals originating from Germanic lands and tinged with effects from Italian culture. As a social historian, Catalan presents a new perspective on Trieste's tolerant *entrepôt*, focusing not exclusively on "port Jews," but integrating historical evidence derived from research on other religious and ethnic groups. Furthermore, this paper also explores the dark side of Trieste, and encourages the idea of deconstructing of the well-nurtured myth of the "tolerant city."

Morphology invites the reader to the introduction of Odessa. Its history resembles the efforts applied by the Habsburgs in launching the port of Trieste. In fact, important trading networks connected the two port-cities and their Jewish inhabitants. Odessa was the city outside of the Pale of Settlement where Jews were allowed to live. Home to the most diverse Jewish population of the Russian empire, Odessa was the cradle of a new, although highly ambivalent, kind of Jewish identity. It somehow managed to be a real and a symbolic place at the same time.

Akin to Trieste, Odessa was a city of many cultural souls, deemed to become and to perpetuate an enduring "myth." Schlör's fascinating article addresses several of these questions and explores what I would like to call Odessa's cultural memories and its ability at myth-making.

The special flavour of the city's cultural memory might be related to its multi-cultural character. What is fascinating about Odessa is what Schlör calls "Odessity" – similar to the concept of "triestinità" – which might stem from a sense of nostalgia and longing. "Not only does Odessa have a Greek, an Armenian, a Jewish, a French and an Italian history, in addition to the more obvious Russian, Ukrainian, Soviet, and post-Soviet narratives, it also finds itself in more than just one place – wherever "Odessity" as a state of mind, a memory, a literary image is being celebrated and constructed."

In as far as Alexandria is concerned, Miccoli's article is aimed at reading the impact of modernity "as a dynamic blending of tensions and exchanges in-between Jews and non-Jews, Egypt and Europe, local knowledge and foreign ideas." As this case-study implicates, the tensions are more explicit because of the conflicting and ambivalent relationship bridging the city to colonial power.

In the nineteenth-century, some of the most important Jewish cities were located in the Habsburg Empire, which was home to an extremely diverse and large Jewish settlement. Cities like Vienna, Prague and Budapest contributed greatly to the development of a modern Jewish culture — and to its critique as well. Here we find ourselves in cities which were the capitals of national areas of the Empire and whose modernizing path reflected the implementation of industrialization at an abrupt pace. Immense poverty and extraordinary wealth, together with the rise of a middle class and an industrial proletariat define the landscape of this modern metropolis.

Although their history is often embedded in their respective national narratives, they all offer an important insight to Jewish modernity: Vienna became, although for a very short time, the thrilling center of Jewish modernity and modernism. Prague, was the hotbed of creative competition of rival languages and cultures; and Budapest represented a unique makeup of Jewish population, which included converts, barons, revolutionaries, and Zionists.

Much has been written about Vienna, caught in between a fascinating and impressive cultural creativity and the harshness of political conflict and anti-Semitism. Lichtblau offers a terse description of social, economic and cultural integration of Jews in Vienna, endorsing interpretations that emphasize the influence of "segregation and social isolation" as explicatory means of the city's cultural creativity. In other words, as we noted above, modernity stemmed and somehow developed, out of anxiety.

Akinsha's paper on Budapest explores one of the most intriguing, yet elusive phenomenon of modern culture, "the passion for art collecting which was in vogue amongst the representatives of the Jewish haute bourgeoisie of Budapest at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century." At the

core of his article stands the investigation into the collection of “Baron Mór Lipót Herzog who not only became one of the leading art collectors of Budapest but also influenced the development of European artistic taste,” and in addition contributed to the rediscovery and popularization of El Greco in Europe.

As far as the Russian Empire, home to a vast Jewish settlement, is concerned, we offer, after Odessa, an insight into Warsaw. Guesnet’s paper is devoted to one of the most important “Jewish metropolis,” the city of Warsaw, and offers an original insight into the relationship between modernity and traditional Judaism. In contrast to established narratives, Guesnet argues “that the acceleration of political and societal change within the Jewish community allowed observant elites to achieve political and cultural hegemony in Warsaw, and thus offers a sui generis pathway of Jewish metropolitan modernization.”

Another crucial dimension of Jewish modernity is the experience of Jews who emigrated and left Europe altogether. War, poverty, and violence pushed millions of European Jews, mainly from the Southern and Eastern areas, to flee the old continent. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, nearly two millions Jews had moved westward, many of them without any thought of coming back. New cities — New York, Chicago, and Cincinnati, just to name a few — emerged as centers of Jewish civilization. Like London, these cities shone as beacons for a better future. They became hotbeds of political activism, literary imagination, and religious response.

In his lengthy article, Raider explores the cultural and intellectual trajectory of Stephen Wise, a Hungarian born Jew whose “synthesis of liberal Judaism, American pluralism, Zionism, and Progressive-era notions of social justice anticipated the rise of a new American Jewish sensibility that would become normative in the twentieth-century.” Stephen Wise exploited to its best the immense possibilities provided both by the idea of the “American frontier” and the chances of a huge metropolis, moving from one side to the other of the continent, from the West coast back to New York City, where he finally established himself as one of the most important rabbis of the early twentieth century.

World War I was a watershed in European history: two empires fell apart, giving birth to new nation-states, the Bolsheviks Revolution and the birth of the Soviet Union. Its impact was felt by Jews in every major city. One way to examine the place of urban Jews in the new world order would be to focus on the major cities of the Soviet Union. Bemporad’s focus on Minsk, offers an original insight into patterns of Jewish modernization under Soviet rule. “The study of a ‘Jewish metropolis’ like Minsk, situated in the heart of the pre-1917 territory of

designated Jewish residence, provides a better insight into the ways in which most Jewish women adjusted to the Bolshevik rise to power, negotiated between Communism and Jewish identity, and integrated into Soviet society.”

At the same time, by the first decades of the twentieth century, a new chapter in Jewish cultural geography developed. Even as the majority of the Jews emigrated to the Americas, a minority participated in that ultimate expression of modernity: the creation of their very own nation-state. New cities like Tel Aviv were born in the “promised land,” a concrete implementation of an age-old dream, tempered by the traumatic experience of modernity. Manor’s paper contributes to shed light on Tel Aviv, as it was perceived through the eyes of Louis Miller, himself a Jewish immigrant who settled in New York. A Yiddish speaking journalist, Miller paid a visit to Tel Aviv in 1911, and managed to see in this new modest garden-city the cradle of the Zionist revolution. Furthermore, Manor stressed how urban life had already encroached at the very core of the Zionist project, even though the main body of Zionist ideologues openly rejected it.

The issue on Jewish cities concludes with a detailed account of the Italian years of Saul Steinberg, one of America’s most renowned artists. The journey of Steinberg from Romania to Fascist Italy and then to America is a personal geography, or better an “autogeography” – and the title of the map we chose as cover for this issue – of many European Jews who had to flee Europe during its darkest time. Tedeschini Lalli’s long article based on this period of Steinberg’s biography takes us back to Fascist Italy and presents us with a detailed insight into the cultural environment of the time. It also suggests a different perspective on space and place, one as performed by individual experiences. Personal and individual geographies could possibly be the theme for another issue in Jewish history.

This collection of articles is an attempt to map a cultural geography of Jewish history in its broader sense, whose aim is to supersede both traditional national historiography and the dichotomy between Zionist and diaspora narratives. In trying to convey a picture of important Jewish cities through a relatively long time span, we hope to enable readers to detect, and evaluate, the persistence of early modern urban and cultural models (such as port-cities) and their transformation through time. This “geographical” perspective also enlightens on the wide range of responses to modernity that Jews were able to perform and implement with great creativity over a relatively long period of time, and invites researchers to confront with comparisons and complexity. Finally, this issue on Jewish cities and modernity should

contribute to a better understanding of the ambivalent nature of nationalism that, with its call for freedom and its ascriptive concept of citizenship, slowly cannibalized both multi-cultural cities and multi-national empires.

From Venice to Warsaw, from Prague to New York, from Berlin to Tel Aviv, the geography of Jewish modernity is a tale of many cities, as diverse as the European and American landscapes themselves. Shaping Jewish culture as much as being shaped by it, these cities offer a tour of the turbulent and fascinating journey of modernity in general, and the indelible skylines that were left in its wake.\*

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