
What are Jewish Cultural Studies?

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Just as a geographical point is located by longitude and latitude, so a Jewish culture item is simultaneously on a vertical line that represents Jewish tradition and on a horizontal line representing the non-Jewish ambience. A Jewish culture item is a compromise formation.—Max Weinreich¹

Jews are different. The Tanakh establishes this difference, the Talmud investigates it and the liturgy repeats it. Jewish difference forms the subject of anti-Semitic speculation and acts as the punchline of countless Jewish jokes. To non-Jews, the particularities of the Jews often look like sheer perversity. When Barry Goldwater died, a conservative Roman Catholic colleague of mine was bothered by the fact that a rabbi helped officiate at the funeral. She e-mailed me. Was Goldwater really a Jew? Amused at being considered a reliable native informant, I answered that well, his father was born a Jew but converted and that Barry was raised an Episcopalian. As far as tradition was concerned, therefore he was not technically a Jew, although the Reform movement would be willing to recognize him as one. Of course, if Goldwater wanted to identify as a Jew ethnically, I went on, there was nothing to stop him.

My answer did not satisfy her. My colleague complained about my "prevarication." "You Jews," she wrote, "are going to have to decide what you really are." I still don't quite understand the not-so-implicit threat here (what will happen if we don't decide?) but I am struck by her frustration. She was not making the old theological claim that Jewish perversity lies with the fact that this stiff-necked and obdurate people refuses to accept Jesus as the Messiah. She was pointing to something much more recent and much more interesting. Jews do not fit into the standard secular categories that modernity has set. Judaism is not merely a religion. Jews form a nation that traces its origin to no geographical territory. After all, the Promised Land was precisely a promise, a goal. Jews are the children of a "wandering Aramean," not a Judean farmer. To be Jewish is to adhere not only to a religion but also to an *ethnos* that is peculiarly "rootless" at that. This *ethnos* is not coterminous with the religion (witness all those secular Jews) but it refers—somehow, some way—back to it.

When the Western states began to consider emancipating the Jews at the tail end of the Enlightenment, they proposed an interesting deal. Jews could become full citizens if they would only give up the particulars of their ethnicity, if they would only spiritualize their identity and redefine it as a matter of pure religion. But this "pure religion" meant recasting Judaism in the mold of Christianity. (There is a little insight—but only a little—to the talk-radio suspicion that Jews are really the purveyors of secularism.) It meant giving up the folkways that had derived from religious practice in the first place. Liberal modernity's distrust of medieval (read aristocratic) corporate privilege could not help but see any remaining Jewish particularity as suspect. Hence, since the seventeenth

and eighteenth centuries, Jews have seemed perversely atavistic because they have embodied nationhood in the pre-modern sense and because their religion, though it has strong universal implications, is not universalistic. (After all, non-Jews are not bound by the 613 laws of the Torah. They only have to subscribe to the seven Noahide laws.) So, even as Jews have claimed full citizenship in the countries of the West, they have never been fully accepted as members of the "nation," that fictional organic unit whose identity has lent legitimacy to the territorially defined nation-state. So Jews are a separate people. Their loyalties (it is feared) always lie elsewhere.

It has been the task of Jewish Cultural Studies (JCS) to study the ramifications of modern (mis)conceptions of Jewish difference. The term "cultural studies" has been stretched thin in recent years, but in JCS it is a term of art that ultimately refers back to the practice of Cultural Studies (CS) as it developed in Britain in the 1960s. Because of its particular institutional past and its interdisciplinary nature, CS in this sense has typically eluded easy explanation. Most accounts turn into histories of who read what when, and truth be told, CS's shifting theoretical investments and intellectual drives do make most sense in a narrative form. Nevertheless, because JCS picked up on CS in its American migration in the late 1980s, I hope I am not doing it too much violence by saying that all contemporary approaches to CS (and thus JCS) accept the premise that no form of identity and no mode of oppression is natural. Rather, all categories and all social complexes are products of ongoing historical social struggle and thus are all susceptible to analysis and change.

In its latest, American incarnations, CS has devoted much of its energies to understanding how representations (and self-representations) of identity (such as race, class, gender and sexuality) have served both to establish and to undermine illegitimate forms of domination. Because it has inherited, in however mediated a way, an older heuristic commitment to the notion of the social totality, CS sees all such expressions of identity and identification as relational and ultimately as negotiations and contests within the context of social power overall. JCS has added religion to the categorical mix.² As Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin put it in the introduction to the first American anthology of work in JCS, CS "provides a base from which the fundamental questions of difference and solidarity, of particular identity and universal concern, can be both explored theoretically and practiced."³ In this context, JCS will serve both a centrifugal and centripetal function. It will speak to a Jewish audience and seek "to discover ways to make Jewish literature, culture and history work better to enhance Jewish possibilities of living richly." It will look beyond Judaism "by uncovering the contributions that Jewish culture still has made to *tikkun olam*...."⁴ It thus will recuperate Jewish experience for the Jews and show how this experience can help recuperate the world at large.

JCS has therefore committed itself in method and in politics to seeing how modern attempts to define and control Jewish perversity relate to other forms of discrimination. Such a commitment informs the work of JCS's two most prolific tutelary geniuses—Daniel Boyarin and Sander Gilman. In the raft of books he has produced since the influential *Jewish Self-Hatred* (1986), Gilman (whose training was in German literature) has studied the ways since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Jewish perversity has been explained (and constituted) as linguistic parasitism, as congenital disease, as anatomical pathology, as racial peculiarity, and as sexual anomaly.⁵ In other words, Gilman has shown how Jewish difference has been construed by the very modern discourses of comparative anatomy, sexology, psychology, epidemiology and scientific racism. He is careful to note that his concentration on descriptions of Jews does not limit the implications of his analyses. He writes that his work:

exemplifies the power of ethnicity as an analytic category for both the professional reader and the author. And my interest in 'health' and 'disease' as categories of the cultural imaginary comes out of my fascination with stigma and its power. We stigmatize that which we fear and against which we need to defend ourselves. This is a universal gesture. Ethnicity here is a factor because of the unique insight that shared experience of stigmatization (and stigmatizing) offers.⁶

The attempt to racialize and pathologize Jews is therefore exemplary and speaks to all forms of unwarranted discrimination against individuals and against groups.

Daniel Boyarin's training was in Talmudics. Since the early 1990s, he has been engaged in a wide-ranging project to show how the Rabbinic valorization of gentle masculinity—a kind of "sissiness"—is valuable precisely because it marks an alternative to the violent masculinity that Western culture has valorized since the Roman Empire. The Rabbis' prescriptions for Jewish behavior and survival—and traditional Jewish practices—become counter-models to many modern forms of sexual and political oppression. Writing of an anecdote in the Talmud, Boyarin is clear in his praise:

The text designates diasporic modes of resistance, deterritorialization, and the grotesque, dismembered, dephallicized male body; resistance not as the accession to power and dominance, but as resistance to the accession of dominance.... The tenacity that is valorized by these texts is the tenacity that enables continued Jewish existence, not the tenacity of defending sovereignty unto death.⁷

To put this in one of Boyarin's pithier summations: the Rabbis posit not Masada but Yavne as the key to Jewish life. They propose study and not the heroics of a beautiful death. The Talmud outlines a form of Jewish existence that eschews violence. It embraces a particularly misogynist notion of the "feminine" as constituted by warrior/aristocratic societies. It then transvalues such "feminine weakness" into something positive. Not only can Boyarin's vision of Judaism ally itself with feminist critiques of patriarchal domination, it can also claim solidarity with queer forms of resistance:

The situation of the European diaspora male Jew as politically disempowered produced a sexualized interpretation of him as queer, because political passivity was in the Roman world equated precisely with effeminacy. In modernity, this became reconfigured as homosexuality.... These "female characteristics" are, as

well the very characteristics that were identified as belonging to the Jew—by anti-Semites and Zionists. Diaspora is essentially queer....⁸

As this last quotation makes clear, Boyarin's conception of JCS matches aspects of traditional Talmudic philology with feminism, post-colonial studies and queer theory. In this kind of affiliative move, he is not that far from Gilman or from any number of very talented younger scholars who work in this field.

From this all-too-brief discussion, it should be obvious that JCS differs greatly from more traditional forms of Judaic Studies. Except for Daniel Boyarin, very few scholars in JCS have devoted themselves to classic Jewish texts. Rather, because they frequently come from literature departments or from history, practitioners of JCS will write about Freud or Kafka, and not the Rabbis or Maimonides. They are more likely to look at the way Irving Berlin both hides and reveals traces of his *Yiddishkeit* than the way Soloveitchik defines halachic man. Unlike traditional scholars of Judaics, they are interested in the social and historical definition of Jewishness and not with Judaism per se.

Overall, we can therefore say that JCS investigates the not-so-hidden costs of Jewish emancipation. It recognizes, in the words of Brian Cheyette and Laura Marcus that "the Jewish other is both at the heart of western metropolitan culture and is also that which is excluded in order for ascendant racial and sexual identities to be formed and maintained."⁹ This play of Jewish inclusion and exclusion is subtle and has led to subtle forms of self-presentation and address. So it is that Jonathan Freedman can trace in Lionel Trilling's work an identification with the anti-Semitic Henry James which in turn transforms "James into a Jew and [high] culture itself into a solution to the problem of anti-semitism rather than a powerful instantiation of it."¹⁰ Similarly, he can see the constant slippage between homosexuality and Jewish identity in Proust's work as a sign of the complicated social negotiations and renegotiations of aristocracy and Frenchness (and ultimately of all identity) at the cusp of the *Belle Epoque*.¹¹ JCS has investigated period discussions of whether American Jews were really white and what it meant and still means for Jews to identify with African-Americans. (And for Jewish men to identify with black men; for Jewish women to identify with black men, with black women and so on.)¹² It has worried the depiction of Jewish masculinity in the sitcoms of the 1950s,¹³ the "queer" Jewish body of Barbra Streisand¹⁴ and that strange post-War construction, the Jewish American Princess.¹⁵ In short, JCS has proven to be very creative in locating and in posing questions to new objects of Jewish study and interest.

JCS, then, has launched a powerful critique of emancipation and has developed a sophisticated accounting of the costs for Jews of the modern imperatives of assimilation and acculturation. One could easily imagine, then, that it would dovetail with the established Zionist attacks on life in the Diaspora. As it turns out, JCS has seen the Zionist drive to normalize the Jews by granting them a nation-state of their own as nothing less than a capitulation to the worst aspects of modernity. A good deal of Daniel Boyarin's polemical thrust is devoted to showing that Herzlian-Nordovian Zionism is in fact a travesty of Jewish tradition. It marks nothing less than a capitulation to the *goyim*, a debased and debasing mimicry:

Modern Jewish culture (not only Zionist) has assimilated the macho male ethos of Western civilization.... Ironically, in an effort to counter the anti-Semitic image of the so-called Jewish wimp, Jewish men have abetted a process of internal colonization of Jewish culture by mainstream Christian culture and have adopted the anti-Semite's aggressive heterosexuality.¹⁶

While Zionism is not the sole culprit in luring Jewish men away from their traditional roles of scholarship, piety and peace, it is the most glaring modern example of the Jewish adoption of essentially alien norms of behavior.¹⁷

JCS therefore tends to be "post-Zionist." It generally accepts the Diaspora and the (relatively) disempowered position of the Jews outside Israel. Because JCS was born of left-wing identity politics and in no small part because it bears the strong influence of the later stages of Foucault's thought (that is, of the period that produced *Power/Knowledge* and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*), works in this field often celebrate "resistance," "subversion" and "transgression." And perhaps because of the strongly pragmatist bent of Foucaultian scholarship—pragmatist in that it sees discourse as a practice of mundane power and is thus more interested in institutions and actions than the finer points of theology—JCS has been largely uninterested in belief, in the religious side of Judaism. If JCS marks an attempt to rethink Jewish identity after Zionism, it goes about it in a remarkably secular way.

We might therefore productively see JCS as a version of what Michael Morgan has called "interim Judaism."¹⁸ In his book of that title, Morgan shows how the thinkers that interest him—Simmel, Benjamin, Rosenzweig and Buber, to name just four—addressed the problems of an emancipated Jewry. Interestingly enough, the conclusion he draws from these grand theoreticians is that after the Holocaust, American Jews should forego theory and develop a religion validated by practice. In proposing his "post-modern" (really post-metaphysical, Rortian) approach to Judaism, Morgan assumes that many American Jews have no faith in revelation and "seem to lack a sense of eschatology." This being the case, he argues for a "post-Holocaust Jewish life" that will consist of "an interim activism, a commitment to worldly acts that seek to repair what is broken but that are performed independently of any messianic expectations . . ." This vision of *tikkun olam* makes no reference to the oral or the written Torah. "Interim Judaism" is defined by a commitment to good works without a grounding in tradition, in overarching justifications or in a sense of redemptive mission:

Ultimately, we may want to know not only what liberal Jews should do... but also *why*. Today it is sufficient that we ask what we should do, come to some conclusions, and take the results to be real principles and standards for us, in our communities, to abide by.¹⁹

Morgan does not say how we would derive the conclusions about what we should do, although he seems to indicate that such a normative discussion could be held without any recourse to justification. Can liberal Jews (meant here in the German sense as non-orthodox Jews) give up the ingrained, post-Enlightenment habit of asking *why*? And what would it mean if they could? Any conversation about what we *should* do becomes merely strategic if it cannot account for why we should do it. More importantly, you do not need to ignore the traditional substance of Judaism to reach a pragmatic, post-modern Judaism. You do not need to sub-

scribe to a literalist vision of revelation to find compelling or convincing a Jewish notion of justice as outlined in the Talmud or as redefined by Maimonides or Levinas. In a similar way, while few people who are not contemporary Evangelicals have a strong sense of eschatology, many people do have a sense of what a just world might look like, or at least what the minimum requirements for a redeemed world would be. To put this in Rabbinic terms, a notion of what a Messianic age might look like probably undergirds most people's notions of justice, even while most people would maintain a proper agnosticism about the *olam ha'ba*. Or to follow Kant, in order to determine what we should do and what we can hope for, we are going to have to ask why.

Now, JCS has not completely dispensed with the traditional texts and themes of Judaism (as we can see in the work of Daniel Boyarin and his brother Jonathan) but most scholars in the field approach them gingerly, if at all. And when they do deal with them, they have tended to discuss the traditional substance of Judaism anthropologically—that is, as a series of practices, not beliefs, and especially not *religious* beliefs. In so doing, as Jonathan Boyarin first suggested more than a decade ago,²⁰ JCS has always remained in danger of erasing Jewish difference. It has made Jews too much like the other people of the world. After all, the scandal of Jewish perversity is that Jews are *both* a religion and an ethnicity. Jews are a nation that defines itself through a shared textual heritage. This heritage entails a complex web of behaviors *and* commitments, practices and beliefs.

JCS could benefit from being a little more "conservative." It should be able to derive new strength from a closer engagement with Judaic studies and with classic Jewish texts. By drawing on the deep resources of this perverse tradition to do its important, critical work, JCS would become more literally *outlandish* and thus more radical.

Notes

1. Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, Shlomo Novel, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980), 53.

2. Religion has not been analytic category for CS and Jews have not been particularly welcome as Jews in CS either. See Jon Stratton, "Speaking as a Jew in British Cultural Studies," *Coming Out Jewish* (London: Routledge, 2000), 35-52, and Jonathan Boyarin, "Introduction," *Powers of Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2002), 12f.

3. Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, "Introduction, 'So What's New,'" *Jews and Other Differences: The New Jewish Cultural Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xi.

4. *Ibid.*, vii.

5. Here is just a partial list of his publications since the early 1990s: *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991); *Rasse, Sexualität, Seuche: Stereotype aus der Innenwelt der westlichen Kultur* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1992); *The Case of Sigmund Freud: Medicine and Identity at the Fin de Siècle* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); *Freud, Race, and Gender* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1993); *Jews in Today's German Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); *Franz Kafka: The Jewish Patient* (New York: Routledge, 1995); *Smart Jews: The Construction of the Idea of Jewish Superior Intelligence at the Other End of the Bell Curve* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996); *Creating Beauty to Cure the Soul: Race and Psychology in the Shaping of Aesthetic Surgery* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); *Making the Body Beautiful: A*