

## INTRODUCTION

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### I

Most scholars work on the assumption that they can recognize modernity in the broadest sense when they see it: modernization often functions as a catch-all phrase, implicitly conveying a series of large-scale forces that worked to transform society, with Northern and Western Europe functioning as their origin and cradle. A standard list would include the Enlightenment, mercantilism/early capitalism, absolutism and the strengthening of centralized authority, along with a whole host of related developments that came into play as indirect outgrowths of these major forces – industrialization, urbanization, secularization, increasing religious tolerance (or at least moves towards this), social and economic mobility, and the gradual, often painful, inclusion of previously marginalized or excluded groups into the political and cultural commonwealth.

The debate surrounding the onset of “Jewish modernity” reaches back into the nineteenth century, and the many and various ways in which Jews became modern, or didn’t, now form a staple of scholarly research. The beginnings of Jewish modernity on a substantial scale have often been situated in the last decades of the eighteenth century in Europe, associated with the rise of the Jewish Enlightenment (Haskalah) in Germany, the granting of civic emancipation to the Jews in France at the outset of the Revolution, and the subsequent emancipation of Jews in other parts of Europe in the wake of Napoleon’s conquests. By way of contrast, 1815 marks the beginning of a period of reaction: for most Jews, part of the downfall of the Napoleonic system was a return to subordinate status. But this once-regnant notion of the Haskalah as the “big bang” of Jewish modernization has been questioned as different strands of modernization are

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scrutinized – religious, intellectual, secular, political, cultural, economic – in different regions.

No matter when we might date its beginnings, it has become clear that we are dealing not with the smooth rise of Jewish modernity, of integration and acculturation, but rather an endlessly complex process of back and forth, success and failure, mutual accommodation and rejection. Rather than re-engage directly with the by-now venerable debate about the beginnings of Jewish modernity, we see this volume as an opportunity, following Lord Acton's dictum, to make problems rather than periods the focus of attention.<sup>1</sup> Since modernity does not "begin," the search for its origins can easily degenerate into a specious undertaking. A degree of self-reflexivity is called for, as it is not sufficient merely to invoke the categories "modern" and "modernity" without further ado. As an historian of the American Revolution has written: "Making modernity their grail gives historians [among others] a strong incentive to discover telltale signs of its emergence."<sup>2</sup> Two points are important here: First, scholars in Jewish Studies have for some time now been aware of the varying ways in which Jews became modern, and this awareness is reflected in this volume. Second, while each Jewry established its own particular relationship to the processes and demands of modernity, it is nonetheless possible to identify similarities and continuities that span time and space, connecting the experience of Jews across political and cultural borders; this too will find expression in the essays found here.

This volume on "modern Judaism," then, poses questions not so much about when the Jews became modern (although this is inevitably addressed), but how and why they did or did not do so. While aware of the perils of being overly prescriptive, we have asked contributors to deal with both the material and ideal spheres. In other words, these essays take account of the ideas and ideologies that shaped Jewish life in the two centuries under consideration, while also conveying a sense of the political, social, economic, and institutional infrastructures that both acted on these ideas and were acted upon by them. In the end, though, we remain keenly aware of the difficulties posed by a project that appears to assume something called 'modernity' – and by extension, Jewish modernity – and

<sup>1</sup> The *locus classicus* of this debate is Michael Meyer, "Where Does Modern Jewish History Begin?," *Judaism* 23 (1975): 329–338.

<sup>2</sup> Jack Rakove, "Drink Hard, Play Hard and Simply Vanish," *London Review of Books*, 23, no. 7 (2001): 32. Cited in David Rechter, "Western and Central European Jewry in the Modern Period: 1750–1933," *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*, eds. Martin Goodman, Jeremy Cohen, and David Sorkin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 383.

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then sets out to find innumerable examples of it. We might argue that this very epistemological and methodological discomfort, a heightened self-reflexivity, is a constitutive aspect of modernity itself. As the sociologist Anthony Giddens has put it, “Modernity turns out to be enigmatic at its core, and there seems no way in which this enigma can be ‘overcome’. We are left with questions where once there appeared to be answers, and ... it is not only philosophers who realize this. A general awareness of the phenomenon filters into anxieties which press in on everyone.”<sup>3</sup>

## II

One of the key themes that reappears in these essays is that of the question of Jewish identity: what did it, and what does it mean to be a Jew within states and societies in which internal, communal, and external mechanisms of control and compulsion are vanishing? Without drawing too rigid of a line between pre-modern and modern along these lines, we can say that this question of identity – the very notion of Jewishness as a potential problem or question to be addressed by Jews themselves – is a fundamentally modern question insofar as it comes to affect immediately not just isolated individuals such as Uriel de Costa or Baruch Spinoza, but potentially every Jew.

Modernity is, in part then, the breakdown of the almost total control of the Jewish community – rabbinic and communal authorities – over the individual, the disappearance of the ability or power of the community to enforce belonging, to impose identity, through a set of compulsive measures. This was itself a product of the emergence of the modern nation-state, with its appropriation and centralization of power and coercion together with the shift from collective to individual rights and duties as the hallmark of the subject or citizen.

Modernity for the Jews will mean a reorientation of the relationship between Jews – at the individual and collective levels – and the government, between Jews and the State. The rise of the modern state, built on the ideals of individual rights, and the civic equality of all citizens, demanded a revolutionary shift in thinking about the relationship between the Jews and the State. This, in turn, would produce dramatic shifts in the relationship between the Jews and other groups within society. And,

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 49. Giddens, however, does draw too rigid a distinction in this regard between modern and pre-modern mentalities and societies, and thus we are not suggesting that pre-modern (and pre-modern Jewish) societies were not also self-reflexive.

just as important, it demanded and produced revolutionary changes in the internal structure of the Jewish community.

The emergence over time of individual autonomy vis-à-vis the organized Jewish community and Judaism as a set of commandments and obligations meant that the individual Jew was increasingly free to choose what it meant to be a Jew. Jewish identity, then, becomes a question, a challenge or problem, a matter of individual decision over the course of a lifetime. This does not mean that there are no “objective” factors involved here. One is either born into a Jewish family or one is not; one is either raised as a self-conscious Jew or one is not. Thus, with the exception of those who converted to Judaism and joined a Jewish community, Jewish identity continued to be a matter in part of descent or biology, as well as familial and communal ties. And these are, indisputably, very powerful forces. But these are the elements that are continuous with the traditional past. What is different, what helps us begin to distinguish the modern from what came before, is the matter of choice: the choice of what sort of Jew to be within an increasingly wide and varied range of religious, cultural, and social possibilities, or even to sever all or most ties to one’s own Jewish past and present.

### III

A volume on the history of Jews in the modern world, in this case one composed of essays by forty authors, must raise the question of narrative unity and coherence. Can there be such a thing as “a history” of the Jews? Can we legitimately speak of something such as “modern Jewish history” in anything but nominalist terms? Do ‘the Jews’ exist as a coherent thing in any sense other than when they are brought together in a volume such as this? While the series in which this volume appears bears the title *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, we recognize, as have others before us of course, the enormous gap between the complex and multifaceted reality of the past and the work that historians do to bring this reality into a more or less coherent and understandable story. Moreover, the essays in this volume range well beyond the strictly religious, and so “the history of Judaism” can be perhaps misleading. Indeed, some of the essays here barely touch on Judaism, qua religion, at all. So we are speaking of Jews or Jewishness as much as Judaism, of the complex and complicated mix of forces and developments over the past two hundred and more years that went into producing a ‘modern Jewish identity’ – or more accurately, modern Jewish identities.

Thus, we conceive of the “Judaism” of this volume’s title in the broadest possible terms: the book aims to offer a portrait of Jewish civilization and its relationships with the surrounding world over roughly the past

two centuries. Given that diversity is at the heart of the modern Jewish experience, such a portrayal will of necessity be constructed from numerous themes, approaches, narratives and episodes. Indeed, it would be futile to attempt to encompass the entirety of “modern Judaism” in a strictly systematic fashion in a single volume. We’re confident, however, that the result is not a mere eclecticism without a discernible connecting thread. Rather, our approach is grounded in the conviction that the essays in this volume present a composite picture of a complex and variegated Jewish society or societies. Our goal was not to put together an encyclopedia on a grand scale; we did not strive for comprehensiveness. A volume such as this by its nature conveys large amounts of information, but contributors accomplish this by means of argument and informed narrative, in the context of ideas and perspectives, not as a form of vulgar factology.

The field of Jewish Studies has experienced exponential growth in recent decades, and given the plethora and sheer variety of modern source materials, it is well beyond the powers of any given individual to master the field(s). Developments both within the Jewish world and in numerous academic disciplines make this a propitious time for a new modern *Cambridge History of Judaism*. As noted above, it was one of our working assumptions that a volume such as this neither can be, nor should strive to be, comprehensive. Inevitably, even with some forty chapters, it will give short shrift or ignore certain aspects of modern Jewish life. In devising the structure and contents, we have made particular choices regarding what deserves extended analysis and what might be addressed only in passing, if at all. It is also necessary to note that there were a number of thematic essays that we wanted, and even solicited, but for one reason or another were unable in the end to secure. Thus, there are notable gaps.

Many of the individual chapter themes will be self-evident to readers with a modicum of familiarity with modern Jewish history: emancipation, national identity, religious reform, social, cultural, and economic integration and/or assimilation, mass migration and mobility, antisemitism, Zionism and the State of Israel. All these, along with other now normative themes, constitute a significant part of the volume. But we have also made choices that reflect important shifts in recent scholarship, both within Jewish Studies and within the larger academy. Many previously unheard, or indeed unimagined, movements have gained traction and now enjoy institutional and intellectual support, demanding integration into any new account of modern Jewry. We imposed no methodological or theoretical demands on individual contributors, and readers will note a wide range of approaches. Some may be dissatisfied that recent particular innovations or trends in critical scholarship did not receive adequate attention. Nonetheless, we hope that part of what this volume can contribute to a wider intellectual audience

is, at the least, a demonstration of the potential utility of approaches for the study of the Jews and Judaism(s) in the modern context.

Recently, for example, Jewish scholars have turned towards post-colonial studies, and particularly scholarship focused on Southeast Asia, to shed light on European Jewry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The essays in *Orientalism and the Jews* (2005) and more recently, *Colonialism and the Jews* (2017), demonstrate how the insights of post-colonial scholarship might be applied to the Jewish case.<sup>4</sup> Contributions along such lines serve to introduce these ideas and methods to many in the field of Jewish Studies. Regardless of whether or not they become convinced of the utility of such an approach to the Jewish past, students of modern Jewry are at a disadvantage if they remain unaware of the ideas themselves, and that post-colonial studies has now made inroads into Jewish studies. In a similar vein, the need to take account of the postmodern turn in Jewish Studies, and in scholarship more broadly, makes a volume such as this timely. Postmodernity is a subject in and of itself, an unavoidable component of the development of scholarship and intellectual life in the second half of the twentieth century; inevitably, it has consequences for how we conceive and narrate Jewish modernity, and we encouraged contributors to incorporate aspects of the postmodern perspective in their essays when appropriate. A new history of modern Judaism must demonstrate awareness of, and engagement with, postmodernity, while at the same time resisting its less persuasive positions and demands. It is necessary to steer a course between, on the one hand, the wilds of a postmodernist fragmentation that denies the very existence of any collective “Jewish experience” and, on the other, an older ethnocentric dispensation that viewed Jewish history and culture as a unitary field and accordingly minimized the substantial differences between scattered Jewish societies. Surely, not all or perhaps even most of the essays here engage directly with this or other recent intellectual developments; but we hope that those that do suggest the possibility and need for further work in this direction.

It is worth noting that many of the most significant developments over the past few centuries, developments that have undoubtedly had a hand in making Jews modern, are not addressed here in any systematic way: revolutionary changes in transportation and communication, in food production and distribution, medicine and hygiene, and the myriad other realms that transformed the lives of everyone over time, Jews included. These, we might say, are the undergirdings of the more particular shifts or changes

<sup>4</sup> Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek Penslar, eds., *Orientalism and the Jews* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2005); Ethan B. Katz, Lisa Moses Leff, and Maud S. Mandel, eds., *Colonialism and the Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).

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within the Jewish communities explored in these essays. In a number of cases individual Jews figured prominently in the creation of these revolutionary shifts or changes that in turn produced “modernity”: for example, the medical research that resulted in identifying the cause of and developing a cure for certain diseases; the research in physics that resulted, *inter alia*, in the discovery of nuclear weapons and energy; the development of the modern department store; the invention of mass advertising, and the emergence of a host of new scientific and scholarly disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and psychoanalysis that purported to make sense of these enormous changes. The stories of these individuals are certainly worth telling. However, one could argue that it was and is the enormous effects, the collective benefits and dangers that resulted from their work that in the end is vastly more important for the story of Jewish modernity.

## IV

*The Cambridge History of Judaism* series offers students and scholars exemplary scholarship, “snapshots” of the best of contemporary work. In the case of Volume Eight, we would hope that, in so doing, it comes to play a significant role in shaping the field’s understanding of itself. It will, we hope, help determine how students of modern Jewish life grasp the general contours of the modern Jewish experience. At the same time, it strives to guide the direction of future research. Thus, we sought to pay due attention to popular and material cultural expressions of Jewishness; to non-traditional or alternative forms of religious expression; and to the methodological insights that come from disciplines such as gender and body studies, none of which have occupied much space in most comprehensive histories of modern Jewry to date. All, however, have contributed greatly to the dynamics of modern Jewish life, influencing the new and different ways in which historians, literary critics, religious and cultural studies scholars tell the story of Jews and modernity. *The Cambridge History of Judaism* is an ideal forum, we believe, for writing these innovations into the normative or mainstream narrative of the modern Jewish world.

Inevitably, as we’ve remarked, there are major gaps in areas covered in this volume. We have tried to be comprehensive geographically and thematically, but we recognize that the volume lacks essays in a number of crucial areas. Thus, there is no essay devoted specifically to the involvement of Jews, or the representation of Jews, in European popular culture – theater, song, film, and television – while we do have essays on this theme for the American and Middle Eastern contexts. Nor is there an essay devoted to Jews and art, or Jews and music. Again, such gaps reflect only a lack of space, not a judgment about the relative significance of these subjects.



Part I, *History and Geography*, lays the foundation for what follows by presenting a series of interlocking surveys that address the history of diverse areas of Jewish settlement. The loose organizing principle for Part II is the magnetic pole of emancipation, broadly conceived; chapter themes here are grouped around the challenges posed by and to this elemental feature of Jewish life in the modern period. Our intent here is not to imply that emancipation was the sole determinant of Jewish modernity. Rather, it allows for a flexible approach that does not fixate on the role or importance of emancipation, but uses it as a plausible and convenient framework to generate an appropriately wide choice of themes. Building on these, Part III adopts a thematic approach organized around the category “culture,” with the goal of casting a wide net in terms of perspectives, concepts and topics. Part IV then focuses on the twentieth century, offering readers a sense of the dynamic nature of Judaism and Jewish identities and affiliations. Surely there will be overlap between sections, as it is neither possible nor desirable to attempt to maintain rigid boundaries when it comes to matters as fluid and dynamic as cultural and intellectual expression and influence. Indeed, it is one of the goals of this volume to explore the variety of ways in which Jews have reinvented and reinvigorated Judaism, Jewish cultural expression, and Jewish forms of community over the past two hundred years. It is imperative to keep in mind that while this is not an attempt to compile an exhaustive catalog, the choice of themes ought not to appear scattershot. Its intent has been the construction of a stimulating and challenging wide-lens portrait. Collectively, these chapters offer a window on to the breadth and depth of Jewish societies and their manifold engagements with aspects of the modern world.