

*Book Reviews*

Will this new American Judaism be sufficient to preserve the Jewish people? Wertheimer wonders. He leans towards doubtful, since he advises American Jews to stop misconstruing their religion as a universal faith and instead calls them to reconnect deeply to “Jewish memory, community, and particularistic content” (272). The question remains: Will American Jews heed his call?

Pamela S. Nadell  
American University



Chad Alan Goldberg. *Modernity and the Jews in Western Social Thought*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017. 256 pp.  
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To read Chad Alan Goldberg’s admirably ambitious *Modernity and the Jews in Western Social Thought* is to be struck by the differences between academic disciplines and the value of great interdisciplinary work. The field of anthropology is rich in self-reflexive histories, studies of how constructions of “the Other” have shaped the methods and assumptions of the field. (One thinks here of the work of Ann Laura Stoler or Johannes Fabian.) Theorists of sociology have made far fewer efforts to consider what the constructedness of the object implies about the sociological gaze. *Modernity and the Jews* offers an important corrective, presenting a fascinating study of how the central concepts of sociology developed by using a concept of the Jews and Jewishness as a foil, and specifically by viewing Jews as a limit case for describing the processes of modernity. Whether seen as exemplary of a tradition resistant to modernity; or of a modernity destructive of tradition; or as typifying problems of cultural, ethnic, social, and racial assimilation, Jews were, during the 150-year period of sociology’s rise, an object of fascination, informing both the self-definition of sociology and its definition of modernity. In focusing on questions of how Jews came to be objectified, reified, and rendered symbolic by these modern narratives, Goldberg has thus written a history of sociology that speaks to the foundations of social-historical method. This work makes an important contribution to the history of the study of the Jews as a national and religious minority, but it also, more subtly, teaches us about how Jewish “obstinance” to conversion and to cultural assimilation helped form the epistemological field of sociology.

Goldberg’s thesis demands that knowledge of Jewish history be brought to bear on the history of sociology, and vice versa. Goldberg’s readers are well served by his double optic. Only with such a properly Bourdieuan respect for how the objects of knowledge are important for constructing a discipline can one grasp what sociology is. To be sure, there are limits to this approach as well. It is not to be expected that a book that surveys one hundred and forty years in as many pages could exhaust the full promise of its title, *Modernity and the Jews in Western Social Thought*. But the book makes elegant shortcuts. By starting with

the French Revolution and skipping the Reformation and Enlightenment and by omitting figures such as Nietzsche, Freud, or Spinoza and whole fields such as anthropology and psychology, Goldberg achieves a tight focus on a well-selected set of core theoretical texts that placed the *problematic object* of “the Jew” at the center of their socio-epistemological interest. Though one might imagine another version of this book in which serious consideration would be given to studies written by Jews themselves about Jewish community, such a book would also have to include empirical studies in which Jews appear more or less neutrally among other minorities, such as Julius Drachler’s still-important 1923 book *Democracy and Assimilation*. By focusing on works that saw the Jews as marginal figures in a larger pattern of social alienation and assimilation, Goldberg seeks to understand how sociology always defines modernity’s Other along with the modern.

Awareness of this logic explains the book’s organization, which starts in Europe and moves toward America, and which—following, as it were, the movement of the world spirit from France to Germany—starts with a chapter on Émile Durkheim only to double back to analyze Karl Marx’s infamous “On the Jewish Question.” Marx’s essay was written a decade before Durkheim’s birth, but Goldberg links the two through an analysis of how the French Revolution transformed categories of citizenship and universalism, religious and national community on both sides of the Rhine. Goldberg convincingly shows that Durkheim’s work must be understood as a reflection on the French Revolution shaped by a Jewish experience. Goldberg reads Durkheim as a theorist of alienation—a “Jewish thinker” in that his vision of sociology explicitly countered the antisemitic and ultranationalist French right-wing attempt to paint the French Revolution (and thus modernity) as a Jewish conspiracy. Instead, Durkheim’s Revolution was both part of a rationalization process and part of a larger mythical struggle between the sacred and the profane, such that it was itself shot through with ritual, myth, and cult-like belief. Durkheim, in other words, viewed the Revolution (and all social thought) as doing the same work as religion: namely, redefining the boundaries of community and law by appeal to a combination of symbolism and rationalization. Marx’s “Jewish Question” also sought, like Durkheim, to turn the tables on a rhetoric of exclusionary nationalism defined by its opposition not just to the French Revolution but to the idea of a money economy and liberal markets. Emphasizing Marx’s roots in the narratives of the French Revolution and the Hegelian critique of Christian theology, Goldberg incisively describes Marx’s descriptions of the economic function of Jewish merchants as crudely schematic, while nevertheless *useful* for theorizing the coercive and alienating dimensions of the modern capitalistic economy. Sociology therefore imbibed from its birth the universalization of the Jewish Question and with it a fascination with “the Jews” as representing modernity’s universalizations and alienations.

Goldberg’s discussions of Weber, Sombart, and Simmel show how German sociology’s analysis of capitalism used the same tropes to articulate anxieties concerning modernization. Sombart’s shockingly crude vision of capitalism emerging from the Jewish religious spirit illuminates the flexibility of Simmel’s idea of the “Stranger” as the beginning of social thought and interaction, as it does Weber’s layered sensibility concerning religious history as the key to economic history.

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If Durkheim made sociology the exploration of the fluidity between the sacred and the profane, Weber and Simmel developed sociology as the study of the polarity reversals of religious and national community as well as those of individualism under economic change.

The final chapter of Goldberg's book shows how Robert Park and the Chicago School refigured the European discourse on the universalization of economic "Jewishness" into one of a general urbanization and alienation. Arguing that Park's notion of "the Marginal Man looks pretty Jewish," Goldberg points to the irony that American sociology quickly took the question of Jewish cultural adaptation and hybridity as a model for immigration in general: the puzzle that acculturation, assimilation, and secularization must be studied together but are often nonidentical to each other, not least in the case of Jews. Goldberg's excellent study deserves to be read widely by sociologists, political theorists, and historians of European and Jewish thought.

Eric Oberle  
Arizona State University



Mara H. Benjamin. *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018. 155 pp.  
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My first time doing ethnographic fieldwork, I fretted about how often I needed to bring my small children along with me if they were sick or if childcare fell through. I fretted about being interrupted in the evenings by my children with their pressing concerns when I was trying to make sense of my field notes. I reasoned that *real* anthropologists (picturing, of course, famous men), whose work was treated seriously, were not distracted by children. Long after, it dawned on me that my challenges of being both mother and ethnographer were the very same ones experienced by the female Torah scholars I was studying, since most had families, some large ones. What I thought delegitimized me in fact connected me to their worlds.

In *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought*, Mara Benjamin declares that while subjective maternal experiences (granted: time-consuming, distracting, and physically exhausting) have been overlooked, suppressed, or rendered invisible, they are sources of embodied wisdom that can be pressingly relevant to the work of Jewish thought. Specifically, they facilitate apprehending matters of relationality: "Engaging with the details of material life does not detract from but rather enhances our ability to engage the theological and ethical significance of the world we inhabit" (xv). Wisely, while Benjamin parses her own experiences and mines them for insight into "boundedness, dynamic responsiveness, autonomy redirected or challenged and contingent power" (xiv), she does not claim that hers are standard. Thus, readers who have