

THE ELUSIVE FIELD OF JEWISH LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

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Introduction

For a social scientist, Latin American Jewish studies are a minefield. The tendencies toward apologetics, discourses of victimization, and the use of taken-for-granted collective self-representations as analytical tools make it almost impossible to enter it without fright. There are, of course, some valuable individual academic contributions. But most of the scholarly meetings and publications have an ingredient of self-celebration that interferes with the exercise of critical thinking and rigorous conceptual and empirical analysis.

These problems are compounded by two factors. The first is the strong multidisciplinary character of Jewish studies in general. This in itself could be an advantage but in practical terms it often becomes a license for non-specialists to invade areas in which they have not mastered the basic tools. The second factor, connected to the fashion of cultural studies, is the sacralization of collective identities and subjective narratives. All too frequently, the appeal to the reader's emotions through the presentation of the author's personal experiences substitutes for the effort to make points on the basis of systematic study.

In fact, there are reasons to wonder whether it is possible at all to define Latin American Jewish Studies as a self-sustainable academic field. Most of the scholarly production in Latin American Jewish Studies would more adequately correspond to a field of Latin American Studies on Anti-Semitism. The literature is thin when it comes to other substantive issues like the social dynamics of Jewish communities, their institutions and

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internal structures of power, the differences and encounters between landsmen groups, the political and cultural currents among the Jews, their interaction with other ethnic groups and Jewish diasporas and, last but not least, the active presence of the Israeli government and American religious organizations.

Another reason to have doubts about the existence of the field is the fact that the supposition that there is such a thing as a Latin American Jewry or a Latin American Judaism is only that, a supposition. I doubt that any Jew in Latin America will define himself or herself as being part of Latin American Jewry or affirm the existence of a Latin American Judaism. Jews are more likely to identify themselves as Argentine Jews, Brazilian Jews, Cuban Jews, etc. The only institutional spaces in which a Latin American Jewry or Judaism seem to exist are the international Jewish organizations and the Latin American Jewish Studies Association. Of course, it can still be argued that, whatever the self-definition of the actors might be, one can still establish analytical connections showing that the Latin American Jewish communities share common characteristics. But this is a matter to be proven by empirical comparative research and, so far, the existing literature is largely country-centered.

Marjorie Agosín's collection *Memory, Oblivion, and Jewish Culture in Latin America* illustrates the lack of inter-country connections and the absence of an overall Latin American perspective. While the editor claims that the book is on Latin American Jews, the materials are mostly focused on Mexico and Argentina, completely excluding, for example, the Portuguese Jewry, the '*cristãos novos*' experience, and contemporary Brazil. The articles fail to make inter-country comparative references. For instance, one of the chapters discusses Zwi Migdal, the network that exploited Jewish prostitutes in Argentina, without mentioning its ramifications in Brazil and missing the opportunity to compare the reactions of the Jewish communities in both countries (in Brazil the prostitutes had to establish their own cemetery and synagogue because they were denied access to the official institutions). Kristin Ruggiero's *The Jewish Diaspora in Latin America and the Caribbean: Fragments of Memory* also suffers from these weaknesses. The collection is heavily concentrated on the Argentine Jews (*et pour cause*, since that is the one community that has suffered serious anti-Semitic attacks in the last decades). The only article on Brazil, to which I will return below, is by Jeffrey Lesser and focuses

on the 1940s. In neither of the two books can one find a single piece of comparative study of Latin American Jewish diasporas.

Agosin's book is composed of a series of essays, mostly short notes, few of which can be said to attain an academic standard. The editor's introduction is a reminder of the litanies that plague the field. The Jews are a 'suffering people' (although Latin American Jewry is overall a case study of successful integration and upward social mobility). The Jewish communities are 'vibrant' (this term appears in both books without supporting evidence or arguments, making one wonder if the authors are trying to reassure themselves and the readers that the subject is worthwhile). There are wild generalizations like 'The past few decades have witnessed an increase in discrimination against them ...' (p. xiv), or 'The recent dictatorships of the southern cone have contributed to the increase in the conspiracy theory propaganda linking the Jewish presence in Latin America to Zionism and the oppression of the Palestinian people' (p. xv). Saying that 'To a certain degree, this anthology coincides metaphorically with the public "debut" of Jewish Latin American culture' (p. xxi), ignoring the public presence of Jewish culture within each country throughout the 20th century.

I will set aside the articles related to the arts and literature and center my comments on the works written by social scientists. On the whole, the 'memoir' pieces that are a major component of Agosin's book have little density. They are not the kind of biographical sketches in which the stories of individuals open windows to larger trends, values, or the 'spirit of an epoch.' Instead of personalities actively engaged in the vicissitudes of their communities and societies, what we find is post-modern ego-trips in which 'the ethnic' is used as an entry point to talk about personal, psychological or existential experiences flavored with gefilte fish. At best they are ethnographic raw material for understanding the lives of post-modern Jews whose identities are almost unrelated to the collective dimensions of the dilemmas, hopes and dramas of a community.

Agosin's book contains only two articles that can be situated in the terrain of the social sciences. Reyes Coll-Tellechea's piece 'Remembering Sepharad' does not take into consideration the rich bibliography on the subject. Most of the historical explanation reverts to issues like 'hate' and 'fanaticism,' featuring anachronisms like 'only pluralist societies produce citizens' while referring to medieval Spain. Much more accomplished is Rannan Rein's chapter on church and state in Argentina between 1944 and 1955,

which offers a critical analysis of Juan Peron's relations with the Catholic Church and the Jews. Rein shows that Peron's presidency should not be approached as a single block, arguing that in his last years Peron detached himself from the church and advanced a more integrative discourse for all minorities, including the Jews. He offers arguments to sustain the idea that the leadership of the Jewish community was right in adopting a cautious attitude *vis-à-vis* the aggressive campaign of the church to impose religious education in the public schools.

Ruggiero's book includes several interesting works for a social scientist. Unfortunately, however, her introduction reflects a very idiosyncratic reading of the articles. Alluding to the 1994 AMIA attack she argues that in Argentina 'so strong is the desire to not remember that even Jews reject the investigation of the bombing' (p. 4). But this is not what the valuable article by Beatriz Gurevich on the AMIA bombing demonstrates. Instead of talking about an existential difficulty in coping with memory, Gurevich points to power struggles within the community and the entanglement of the personal interests of some community leaders with the government of Carlos Menem. Ruggiero also refers to the persecutions, tortures and killings of the Argentine dictatorship as 'genocide.' While there can be no doubt that it was a murderous dictatorship that inflicted terrible suffering, the use of the term 'genocide' (if intended as more than a literary license) is clearly inappropriate.

Most of the articles by social scientists focus on Argentina, with three exceptions. One of them is William Miles' chapter on the Jews of Martinique, a small community about which little is known. Miles notes that the Jews do not participate much in the new, hybrid culture of Martinique. This, however, is not a result of rejection on the part of the Gentiles, some of whom are actually sympathetic to Jews and Judaism. According to Miles, it is the largely Sephardic Jewish community that seems uninterested and prefers to keep its distance, not only from Martinique's broader culture, but also from the smaller group of Ashkenazi Jews and their concerns (such as remembering the Holocaust).

The study of Jeffrey Lesser on Getulio Vargas' policy towards Jewish immigration does not capture the richness and complexity of Brazilian culture. He explains the change in Vargas' Jewish immigration policy as the product of the success of Brazilian Jewish leaders and international Jewish organizations in 'transforming negative stereotypes into

positive ones. This was possible because the stereotypes were devoid of content' (p. 36). As if stereotypes depended on their content being true and changing them depended on confronting prejudiced people with the real facts. Vargas' policy change was related to an array of diverse factors. His government, despite the influence of some anti-Semitic politicians and despite the fact that it was a repressive dictatorship, did not break the entrenched patterns of Brazilian sociability and political culture based on pragmatism, negotiation and cooptation. In his early years in power Vargas disbanded the proto-fascist Ação Integralista Brasileira and his cultural policy was based on a nationalistic integrative discourse akin to Argentina's Peron in the last years of his presidency. With his sights set on advancing Brazilian industrialization, Vargas succeeded in manipulating the Americans' interest in having a base in the South Atlantic. The fact is that, in most Latin American countries, the Jews and their issues do not occupy a central place in the national political or cultural agendas. The attitudes and orientations of a government towards the Jews must be understood within the context of the wider societal issues and the political culture of the country in question.

Robert Levine' article on the Jews of Cuba is the most original piece in Ruggiero's book and an excellent example of good critical scholarship for this field. Levine's goal is to deconstruct the 'official' version of the memories of Cuba's Jews about their community before and after the 1959 revolution. He argues that when the exiles talk about the demography of the Cuban Jews they only consider the people who were organically related to the institutions of the community, leaving aside an important group of (mostly Ashkenazi) Jews who had a more secular orientation and/or married Gentiles and drifted away from the community. If that group is taken into account, the number of Jews that remained in the island after the revolution increases from the 'official' 10 per cent to much higher proportion, probably up to 50 per cent. According to Levine, the reconstructed memories of the exile Jews tend to minimize their social marginalization before the revolution, the negative impact of the Batista's mafia-style of government on their economic activities, and the extent of the Jews' support to Fidel Castro in the first stage of the revolution.

Turning to the chapters on Argentina, Raanan Rein reviews the 1960-1962 period, focusing on the impact of the capture of Adolf Eichmann and the rise of the anti-Semitic organization Tacuara. The piece by David Sheinin on the military dictatorship and

human rights and the already mentioned work by Beatriz Gurevich offer detailed analyses that help understand the internal discrepancies within the Jewish community regarding the proper reaction to the AMIA bombing. They are indeed worth reading. One question raised by this reading has to do with the roles of American Jewish organizations and the Israeli government. It would seem that there is a 'division of labor' by which, using Albert Hirschman's concepts, American Jewish organizations play the role of 'voice' for the Argentine Jews, while Israel plays the role of 'exit.' The American Jewish organizations, sometimes even against the will of the local community's leaders, publicly condemn the Argentine governments' anti-Semitic policies. At the same time, Israel is seen as the place to emigrate or escape; a perception that the Israeli government actively promotes. In connection with this, one of the many issues on which more research is needed is the role of the Jewish Agency facilitating the emigration (and the saving the lives) of political activists persecuted by the dictatorships of the Southern Cone.

The difficulty in consolidating a corpus of solid scholarly research in Latin American Jewish social studies and, more generally, in the area of Jewish social studies calls for an explanation, particularly when one takes into account the abundance of Jewish social scientists. Without doubt, an important factor is the strong patronizing presence of Jewish community organizations and their material and ideological influence in the choice of research subjects. Another important related element is the isolation of Jewish communities from other minorities, which is rooted in the self-representation of the Jewish experience (particularly after the Holocaust) as exceptional and incomparable, and whose main consequence is the loss of a much-needed comparative perspective. A third factor is the tendency of the more secular and open-minded Jewish intellectuals to alienate themselves from Jewish communities which they often see as narrow-minded, parochial and mostly dominated by conservative leaderships. Finally, we should not forget that the vitality of an area of social study is always related to the vitality of the social object itself. The relative social homogenization of Jewish communities in the last decades, interacting with other trends in society at large, has de-politicized the Jewish experience, dampening the confrontation of ideas and the search for more critical understandings of what is happening within the communities. In the case of Latin American Jewish studies these factors are compounded by the small demographic weight of the Jewish communities, the lack of relevant research centers devoted to

Jewish studies and the pressing social and political problems of our societies, where studying the dynamics of Jewish identities and communities does not seem to have any special priority. In this context, Jewish studies become either a secondary occupation or a field colonized by foreign Latin Americanists whose research agendas respond to their own academic environments, sensibilities, career and prestige considerations, and fieldwork possibilities.

I would like to end on a more optimistic note. There is a new generation of Latin American Jewish scholars (unfortunately this field of study does not attract many, if any, non-Jewish researchers) that is being formed within a more favorable intellectual environment in which cultural studies, identities, diasporas and migration are becoming part of the mainstream agenda Latin America social sciences. Like never before, they have opportunities to make important contributions to the understanding of Jewish communities within the context of the social and cultural dynamics of their broader societies. To succeed, they must relate their questions to the Latin American critical tradition, transcending the naïve celebration of collective identities in order to investigate the tensions between (individual and group) interests and solidarities, the use of identity as a power resource and the (national and international) symbolic and material structures that underpin community institutions.