

EAJS Conference Grant Programme 2017/18

Histories and Theories: Jewish Studies Across Disciplines

REPORT

Report on the 2018 conference of the British Association for Jewish Studies

The conference took place 9-11 July 2018 at the Calman Learning Centre, University of Durham.

Organiser: **Dr Yulia Egorova**, University of Durham, BAJS President 2018

Report by: **Dr Yulia Egorova, Durham University.**

The conference attracted a healthy number of delegates with over 80 papers presented, 3 keynote speakers, and around 100 attendees. With the generous support of the EAJS we were able to fund Professor Martin Goodman's keynote address, and award 6 travel bursaries to postgraduate students and early career researchers from universities in Europe, Israel, and Peru. Additional funding from St Aidan's College at Durham University included the sponsorship of Professor Susannah Heschel's keynote, and of panels organised by Dr Zoe Roth and Dr Ilan Baron showcasing the work of the Centre for the Study of Jewish Culture, Society and Politics at Durham. The Department of Anthropology sponsored travel bursaries for a PhD student based in Queensland University (Australia) and an early career researcher based at the University of Sussex.

Event Rationale

The conference sought to put key Jewish Studies questions in dialogue with broader intellectual concerns of different academic disciplines. What do varying understandings of what it means to be Jewish tell us about contemporary constructions of what it means to be a human being and a fellow citizen? In what ways does research into Jewish diasporas contribute to debates about transnationalism? How does the diversity of Jewish communities' sociality, religion and culture reflect the social diversity of their localities? The conference explored how Jewish Studies can both engage with existing intellectual agendas of the humanities and social sciences and provide a model for inquiry that goes beyond disciplinary boundaries. We received outstanding paper and panel proposals which examined Jewish traditions in different parts of the world and in different historical periods, and made for an intellectually stimulating three-day itinerary of reflection, discussion and debates. The conference demonstrated that the British Association for Jewish Studies has a strong and visible presence not only in national academia, but also outside the UK, as we received a significant number of paper proposals from scholars based on the European continent, Israel, Australia and the Americas.

Papers and discussion

The fact that over 3 days more than 80 papers in 4 parallel sessions were presented makes it impossible to discuss each one. However, we attach the conference handbook, which includes abstracts and affiliations for each presenter, and the full conference programme. The following will reflect on the keynotes only and draw out major conference themes from these.

Keynote Lecture by Professor Martin Goodman (University of Oxford).

The History of Judaism and the History of Religions.

Tracing the development of Judaism since antiquity brings to light not only the extent of change but also the extent to which variety of theology and practice were tolerated in all periods. The lecture considered how this came about in a religious system founded on a text which forbids deviation from revealed teaching, and how the pattern of religion to be found in Judaism relates to those of the other Abrahamic religions.

The Q&A offered a productive discussion about the specificity and diversity of the Jewish tradition, which got the conference off to an excellent start, as it spoke directly to the main theme of the meeting. Part of the discussion revolved around the question about whether it is possible to delineate a special position of Judaism in the broader history of religions which would mark it as particularly tolerant of diversity and inclusion.

Keynote Lecture by Professor Bryan Cheyette (University of Reading).

The Ghetto as Travelling Concept.

“Ghetto” is what Raymond Williams once called a “keyword”. It has layers of contradictory meanings accrued over half a millennium and a bewildering array of contexts across most of the world. If “keywords” are characterised by their contentiousness then “ghetto” would be at the top of the list. Is it a term of abuse or resistance; a way of understanding commonplace urbanisation or a unique form of racial segregation; is it a profound indication of how winners and losers are divided in the global metropolis or merely a superficial aspect of global culture (film, music, fashion)? The lecture traced the word ghetto—as both place and concept—across a wide range of histories. It will begin with three hundred years of ghettoization on the Italian peninsular followed by the nineteenth century imaginary ghetto; the urban ghetto; the Nazi genocide of Jews in Europe; black ghettos in America’s northern cities. It concluded with the “global ghetto” or slums, townships and favela in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. Not only did the talk refer to a wide range of comparative histories but also looked at the question of disciplinarity (or “disciplinary thinking”) with Jewish studies falsely cast in a foundational role in relation to a wide range of “newer” disciplines.

The discussion focused around a number of theoretical concerns in Jewish Studies and closely engaged with the relationship between Jewish Studies and Postcolonial Studies. Again, the keynote lecture spoke exceptionally well to the theme of the conference by elucidating the critical theory potential of the discipline.

Keynote Lecture by Professor Susannah Heschel (Dartmouth University).

Theorizing Jewish Studies: Race, Gender and Empire.

Does the text function as a metaphor for the fence? We live in the era of the fence, the barrier that keeps out the refugees, the starving, the fleeing, the asylum seekers, those who want to partake of a life in countries without war: a guarantee of food, shelter, education and medical care without threat of prison, guns, death. The fence keeps out human beings of the south

pressing to enter the north. But what about the text, the narratives we construct and that constitute our scholarship? Is the text a wall against the humane or is it a cultivation of ethical sensibilities? How do we adjudicate conflicts between texts and ethics, fences and democracy? To work in the field of Jewish studies in the era of Trump and Bibi raises questions about the narratives of Jewish history and also about the theory, methods and issues we raise in our teaching and scholarship. An imperialist ethos dominated the Wissenschaft des Judentums of the nineteenth century, conceptualizing Judaism as autochthonous and as the foundation of Western civilization. Where does that conceptualization stand today? How do we trace the development within Jewish historiography of the mounting conflicts and social pathologies that are overtaking us today? The lecture gave a historical overview of the field of Jewish Studies viewed in the context of European imperialism, followed by a discussion of the contemporary situation of the field, the relationship between scholarship and political engagement, and ways of thinking about the ethics of scholarship and of our reading, thinking, teaching and writing. The talk gave particular attention to the ways our work might be informed by studies of empire, race and gender.

This was an extremely useful key-note lecture to end the event, which engaged not just with the theme of the meeting, but also with specific contributions made throughout the conference. The discussion in the Q&A focused on the questions pertaining to the contribution that the discipline of Jewish Studies is in a position to make to current debates in the humanities.

The keynote lecture by Professor Fania Oz-Salzberger unfortunately had to be cancelled due to a family emergency.

Summary

In a large conference such as this, it would be hard to report on all threads that were discussed, but it could be highlighted that what probably distinguished this BAJS conference is the width of engagement with issues in the study of modern and contemporary Jewish history. I would also point out that what worked particularly well this year, is encouraging delegates to submit panel proposals exploring a specific theme. This resulted in the presentation of four panels - *Theory's New Jews: Emerging Directions in Jewish Studies*, proposed by Zoe Roth, *Debating Israel*, proposed by Ilan Baron, *The city shaping its Jews: archaeology and history of cross-cultural and interreligious influences on urban Jewish groups in Antiquity*, proposed by Esther Schneidenbach and Jessica van 't Westeinde, and *The Haredi 'Problem': Haredi Life and Response to the Secular*, proposed by Heather Munro. All four panels made an excellent contribution to the main theme of the conference and received overwhelmingly positive feedback.

Planned outcomes and outputs

I suggest that the main outcome of a large conference like this is the opportunities for international networking that it provided for all delegates, and particularly for early career researchers and PhD students. I was very pleased to see that the conference attracted a healthy number of students and ECRs. The programme included a specially dedicated session for students and early career researchers, led by Marton Ribary and me, which received excellent feedback from participants who complemented us on the clarity and usefulness of our discussion of career development opportunities for emerging scholars. This outcome was made possible by the EAJS grant. The publication outputs of the conference will include a collection

co-edited by Rohee Dasgupta and Yulia Egorova exploring the contribution that Jewish Studies have made to theoretical debates in social anthropology. Publication plans are well developed.