

TRAVELS IN JEWISH ANTHROPOLOGY

Matti Bunzl

It was the fall of 1997, and I can still recall my surprise and delight. I was perusing the positions advertised on the Web page of the American Anthropological Association when I came upon a listing from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. They were looking for an “anthropologist of Jews and Judaism.”

The advertisement was a genuine novelty. Never before had an anthropology department explicitly searched for a scholar with expertise in Jewish culture and society. As I soon found out, the position was the result of an initiative by Michael Shapiro and Gary Porton, the leaders of the local Jewish studies program. They had secured a significant pledge for the extension of the program. Three junior positions were to be created, two of them in the traditional fields of Jewish history and Yiddish, and one, out of a sense of innovation and intellectual adventure, in anthropology. These positions would be housed in the respective departments, and after some discussion of the merits of an ethnographer of Jewish culture, the department of anthropology agreed to accept the faculty line.

When I saw the ad I didn’t know that I was an “anthropologist of Jews and Judaism.” Simply put, the category didn’t exist, certainly not in the context of my graduate

education. Within the discipline of anthropology, the ethnography of Jewry was not a recognized subfield. To be sure, there were a handful of pioneers—scholars like Barbara Myerhoff, Riv-Ellen Prell, and Jack Kugelmass—whose work I greatly admired. But in the logic of the august graduate program at the

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University of Chicago, my ethnographic work on Austrian Jews did not make me a “Jewish anthropologist.” Rather, I was an “anthropologist of Europe” who happened to work, among other things, on Jews.

This was certainly how I thought about myself. As soon as I saw the listing for the Illinois position, I started to rethink my work in its light. Having undertaken research on German- and Austrian-Jewish history as well as contemporary Austrian-Jewish culture, I decided to throw my hat into the ring. Throughout the interview process, I made it clear that while my work did fit the gloss of “anthropology of Jews and Judaism,” I had no formal training in Jewish studies. Illinois, however, was looking for exactly that—a professional anthropologist who worked on Jews.

In the spring of 1998 I was offered the position and I accepted without hesitation. Ultimately I understood that I needed to design an undergraduate curriculum in Jewish anthropology. I embarked on that project over the next few years.

To date, my efforts have resulted in the creation of four permanent courses: “Jewish Cultures of the World,” “American Jewish Culture,” “German-Jewish Culture and History,” and “The Holocaust and Its Meanings.” “Jewish Cultures of the World” is the most explicitly anthropological course. It sets out to cast as wide a net as possible on the arc of Jewish experience. In particular, I am interested in exploring Jewish life-ways in the non-Western world

(both past and present), introducing students to Jewish communities in North Africa and the Middle East, South Asia, and Latin America.

“American Jewish Culture” aims much closer to home. Using a number of ethnographies and cultural histories, as well as artifacts of popular culture, I seek to introduce my students (both Jewish and non-Jewish) to the historical complexity and cultural richness of American Jewish existence. An extended unit on synagogue life commences the course, which then moves on to a unit on immigration and acculturation. I close the course with the roles of Israel and the Holocaust in American Jewish experience.

I hope to augment the curriculum I have developed by introducing classes on Judaism and gender and the ethnography of Israel/Palestine. But even at the current level, it has become clear to me that I can make a number of important contributions to our Jewish studies

program. More generally, I have come to believe that anthropologists are uniquely positioned to enhance Jewish studies pedagogy. In particular, I see three domains where anthropological expertise can make a real difference: comparison, ethnography, and a focus on the present.

(1) Much of Jewish history, even the new social and cultural history, is organized along national or geographical domains. This is certainly true of research (German-Jewish history, Russian-Jewish history, etc.). But it also characterizes much of the teaching Jewish historians do. Even if courses do reach beyond national boundaries, they are still taught through a concept of contiguity where various eras and areas are characterized through continuity and similarity.

Anthropologists tend to approach Jewish culture comparatively. Most of us still write dissertations and books on particular communities, and we often do so with particular attention to time depth, a practice that brings Jewish anthropologists into close conversation with Jewish historians.

But in our teaching, many of us reach back to a classic anthropological agenda of global comparison. Traditionally, this agenda turns on such big questions as “what unites us” and “what divides us.” Our real contribution as anthropologists of Jews and Judaism may lie in our concomitant attention to the differences and specificities that characterize the world’s Jewish communities.

This classically anthropological agenda is at the heart of such courses as my “Jewish Cultures of the World,” and it could similarly be mobilized in comparative courses on Jewish ritual or Jewish art. In all these cases, the pedagogical effect can be quite dramatic. Like the best anthropology, it can contribute to making the strange familiar and the familiar strange. Especially for an audience of American Jews, such a recognition of Jewish difference can be an eye-opening experience. The centrality of Simchat Torah in Indian-Jewish life versus the prominence of Hanukkah in American life (both a function of

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communities’ adaptations to dominant religious/cultural contexts) is a good example for a comparative instance that never fails to astound my students for whom Hanukkah simply is self-evidently important.

(2) Ethnography is at the heart of anthropology. It is both the preferred mode of data collection and the principal means of that data’s presentation. It is also notoriously difficult to define. Much like its near twin—fieldwork—it has almost mythic status in the discipline. Ethnography, for its part, can be undertaken to capture the past (historical ethnography) or, more commonly, the present. In either case, however, it focuses our attention on certain aspects of

human existence, particularly the sheer banalities of everyday life. On closer inspection, those turn out not to be so banal at all, incorporating such salient markers of identity as dress, food, kinship relations, and the realities of social structure. All these domains of life are highly routinized, and it takes genuine effort to render them from an analytically meaningful perspective. This emphasis on what Jews actually do complicates our understanding of Jewish life in at least two ways.

For one, it helps us recognize that the overwhelming number of Jews spend most of their time in activities

that have very little to do with Judaism as a religion. This is not to say that religion doesn’t matter or that it has no ramifications and echoes in peoples’ existence. But its salience tends to be overstated, if only implicitly, by a discipline that

trains so much of its conceptual framework on religion. In that context, all other aspects of Jewish life appear all too easily as subordinate, a bias readily corrected by an ethnographic approach.

For another, ethnography facilitates the realization that Jewish culture is rather messy at its edges. It is often difficult to decide where Jewish culture ends and, say, German culture starts. Many Jewish historians avoid this problem by holding the Jewish variable constant in the source material. As a result, they produce neatly demarcated German-Jewish histories, and while those have considerable merit, they tend to underestimate (and sometimes even misrecognize) the blurring that takes place. By contrast, such blurring is often what

anthropologists find most fascinating, not least because it raises the seminal question about how Jewish boundaries are made and remade and whether that process is a function of internal or external forces. While such analyses put pressure on the very concept of Jewish culture, they afford new and important insights into Jewish lives, past and present.

(3) The overwhelming majority of scholars in Jewish studies work on and teach about the Jewish past. The statement is so self-evident, it barely seems worth remarking upon. So much of what seems worthy of our attention existed in the sometimes very deep past: Biblical history, post-exilic thought, medieval philosophy, Jewish emancipation, etc. No one would argue, of course, that these vital subjects should not be taught. But they can create a sense that recent history and contemporary Jewish life are less worthy of attention. Compared to the glorious Jewish pasts, the present can seem outright inauthentic, and altogether less interesting. The neglect of the present, however, has real pedagogical consequences.

Minimally, it creates Judaism as an entity of the past, and the anthropological commitment to fieldwork and the here and now can serve as a potent corrective.

Contemporary articulations of Jewish culture are accessible to anthropologists. But they can also be gauged, and quite readily at that, by our students. This, finally, might be the greatest asset associated with the inclusion of anthropology in Jewish studies programs. As anthropologists, we can convey a distinct perspective on Jewish culture to our students. Even more importantly, we can embolden them to become ethnographers themselves.

In my “American Jewish Culture” course, for example, I require all of my students to complete an ethnographic project. I give them careful instruction on the basic tools of fieldwork and discuss with them individually any ethical questions and cultural concerns raised by their projects. On the whole, the experience has been marvelous. My students have undertaken remarkably inventive projects that showcased to themselves and the

class the richness, variety, and complexity of contemporary Jewish culture. Among my favorite projects have been a study of Jewish speed dating and an investigation of the concept of “Jewish geography.” Once, a (non-Jewish) student presented a rather brilliant ethnography of the class itself as his first systematic encounter with Jewish culture.

Other anthropologists of Jews and Judaism bring related qualities to their research and pedagogy. And as a group, we could easily formulate sets of contributions beyond the comparison, ethnography, and present I stressed. But I hope my point is made. Just in case, though, let me put it a bit more bluntly. EVERY JEWISH STUDIES PROGRAM NEEDS AN ANTHROPOLOGIST.

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