Latin American Jewish Social Studies: Trends and Challenges

Judit Bokser Liwerant

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Latin American Jewish social studies have reached today a highly diversified conceptual and methodological spectrum, while also facing new cognitive and practical challenges. Past tendencies and present developments express both changing theoretical dimensions and institutional conditions. Transformations in the profiles of Jewish life at the regional level, changes in the social and cultural life in a global world and new scientific configurations constitute diverse stimuli for expanding trends. As other social sciences fields, it exhibit a dual trend of development. On the one hand, this field faces a growing specialization through a process of theoretical and analytical refinement and greater specificity in the tools and techniques of investigation. On the other hand, it shows a growing cross-disciplinary interaction; therefore, the sustained need for conceptual and methodological bridges. It is certainly a field born out of disciplinary convergences. The establishment of a cognitive field is a creative process that actively carves out various intellectual and scientific realms rather than merely identifying natural ones. Just as geopolitical and material frontiers are no longer viewed as natural data, the frontiers of knowledge are also put under question.

Latin American Jewish social studies have developed as a realm of multiple encounters: history and sociology, political science and anthropology, psychology and economy, Diaspora, ethnic and regional studies, international relations, linguistics and literature, sociology of religions, Jewish studies and Contemporary Jewry, demography and semiotics constitute a complex array of unequally developed disciplinary approaches, theoretical perspectives and methodologies. Simultaneously, the region’s varied national realities have been referents of a diversified path of regional development. The conceptual awareness of the global and transnational nature of the Jewish existence has widened its contours and enhanced the need to incorporate the multiple dimensionality of Jewish life.

Paralleling social sciences in the region, Jewish social studies and research were driven and defined by conceptual and methodological developments that came from abroad. Initially, such
formulations were uncritically incorporated and, gradually, they were adjusted, contested and refined as part of an ongoing multi-focal dialogue. In its specific academic route, this field has been marked by two main foundational areas: Jewish Studies proper, centered on the social and cultural collective experience, and Regional Studies, focused on Latin America as its specific concern. Convergences and divergences also developed among them. The field’s institutionalization process has been slow and fragmented due to an academic culture that privileged alleged universal contents and homogeneous national identity over the study of particular and collective belonging. Both Liberalism and Nationalism have sought to downplay minority cultures and legacies in order to reach a primordial, territorial, and religiously homogeneous profile; thus, the difficulty to deal with diversity also permeated the intellectual academic milieu. This trend, however, is changing today in light of the political and cultural transformations in the region that favor pluralism- political, institutional and cultural--; identity politics and diversity. Thus, while the transnational character of Jewish life acted as an initial stimulus to the field, the increased visibility and growing legitimacy of Jewish life in Latin America can be seen as an ulterior research incentive.

Notwithstanding its current growth, it evidences strong disciplinary imbalances, partly reflecting theoretical conceptions and partly structural and institutional constraints. As has been the general tendency of Social Sciences in Latin America, Jewish social studies has developed within the framework of changing and conflictive expectations and demands which shaped the disjointed character of institutionalization and professionalization processes. Different actors in society and in the Jewish community have underestimated the field’s importance. The awareness by the communal leadership of the relevance of social science research for developing strategies did not become a relevant reality, although one that is gradually changing.

A NON-LINEAR PATH OF DEVELOPMENT

Paralleling the shared demands of systematization, logic, validation and relevance, social sciences develop through different levels of formalization of knowledge. On the highest levels of conceptual abstraction, theories reflect basic assumptions regarding the character or nature of our object of study. Middle range theories focus, in turn, on more specific dimensions and disciplinary approaches, while the empirical research, focused on factual data, interacts with the previous levels in order to increase in meaningful ways its explanatory capabilities. Meta-theoretical, philosophical and/or ideological assumptions interact as well in complex ways, while social expectations and demands vis-à-vis social knowledge still intervene in shaping a multifaceted dynamics of development. A fluent and non-linear process of theoretical and
institutional development, which implies crossing geographical, institutional and disciplinary borders, has characterized Latin American Jewish Studies.

Pioneering efforts to develop the area were associated to Contemporary Jewry comparative studies. The prevailing assumption was that local Jewish realities needed to be explained and understood through a systematic contrast with parallel processes elsewhere in the Jewish world. The development of comparative research among Jewish communities and institutions in different regions sought to underscore the global and civilizational character of the Jewish world in which Latin America featured as a particular case or modality within a larger context. The work of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem during the late 1950s and the 1960s established the foundation for such comparative research. The goal was to “outline, by means of comparison, some disparate and common elements in the three main Jewish centers in the Western Hemisphere [United States, Canada and Argentina],” emphasizing the organizational aspects as well as the study of representative institutions. As in other comparative studies then developed under the prevailing influence of the modernization paradigm, the North American Jewry became the guiding archetype model for the study of other Jewish communities. However, the specificity and relative autonomy of Jewish life and the shared migratory origins countervailed the reductionist risks implied by this theoretical framework.

These first steps led by Moshe Davis were followed by a second phase, which developed around the concept of “frontier society” as a basic analytical tool. In the discipline of political science, Daniel J. Elazar and Peter Medding published a systematic study of Argentine, Australian and South African Jewry. The concept of “frontier society” referred both to the general societies and to their Jewish communities, stressing that in spite the fact that they were extensions of a “motherland” located in Europe and in the Middle East, their distance from the societies of origin resulted in the persistence of cultural codes and patterns even after they had disappeared in the countries of provenance. The political-organizational approach that was developed nourished fruitful comparative research with a strong typological character. Emphasis was placed on the development of Jewish institutions and on factors influencing community building. A central aspect was the process of institutional adaptation to the surrounding society, highlighting as key conditions the societies’ level of development and the rhythm and profile of Jewish migratory trends. However, by asserting that the Latin American experience differed from the North American, the analyses stressed an unsuccessful process of integration that constrained the construction of strong and publicly recognized Jewish communities. The main hindrance, so it was argued, lied in the Catholic, ethnic-religious profile of Latin American countries and in their search for a homogeneous national identity that had
marginalized from its national narrative groups alien to its foundational core. Also structural traits lie behind the limited integration process that accounts for the centrality of Israel and Zionist organizations. As stated, this comparative approach was largely based on the prevailing paradigm provided by middle range theories of modernization. They were mostly based on the assumption that Modernity, as it developed in Europe first and thereafter in the United States would ultimately become the unique model and referent for all societies. Wider conceptions that would approach Latin America and its Jewish communities in their own singularities were not yet developed. These approaches still lacked the conceptual understanding of the diverse routes or “Multiple Modernities”, a fruitful concept that, even though contested, opened new conceptual horizons. At this stage, although comparison enabled data collection, the knowledge generated was mainly descriptive. The lack of further theoretical elaborations that could have deepened comparative insights limited its breadth and heuristic potential. However, one must assert that this model was the source of the very first systematic and academic efforts to study Latin American Jewish life with a world perspective.

Oriented towards the study of both regional and national cases in a world Jewish framework, a new approach was developed to build criteria that accounted for regional subdivisions. The search for interconnections between societies and their Jewish communities served as the organizing principle of the new historical studies headed by Haim Avni. His studies also pivoted the analysis of integration patterns regulating the visibility and legitimacy of Jewish life in Latin America. The distinction between Euro-America and Indo-America, according to the impact of immigration on its population profile and composition, enabled the analysis of the social role of minorities, particularly the Jewish one. The categorization of the societies’ ethnic and cultural composition provided a starting point for studying the diversity of political, economic, and historical trajectories. Thus, in Euro-America, in societies such as Argentina and Uruguay, massive immigration changed the socio-ethnic profile and gave rise to multi-ethnic societies, with civil equality and constitutional rights for members of minorities. The latter did not preclude the absence of collective identities’ public legitimation derived from the dominance of a melting pot model of integration. In turn, in Indo-America, in societies of limited immigration such as Mexico, Peru, or Ecuador, the original and mestizo ethnic composition of the population strengthened the rejection of diversity. Avni’s comparative perspective focused on what was defined as the main shared dilemmas of Jewish life in Latin America: public legitimacy; ethnic and cultural homogeneity, the limits of the right to be different and the dependency on international Jewish organizations. The central role played by the State of Israel in organized Jewish life was also stressed.

As history became the hegemonic discipline in Jewish Social research, voluntarism and
organizational communal diversity set the guidelines for future investigations focused on the structure of Jewish communities. The resulting studies integrated the detailed description of communities and their links with the international organized Jewish world. This model was applied globally as well as in specific areas, and in comparative studies within the continent, taking into account migratory processes in various countries as well as the sub-ethnic patterns of organization. Studies that focused on the relationship with Israel through the lens of the One Center-Diaspora model developed. These studies account for the Zionist construction of hegemony, as well as for the various ideological and political currents and debates that were present in the highly politicized Latin American “Jewish street”. The links between the center and the Jewish communities developed distant from a one-fold uncontested dynamics. Research shed light on (and interacted with) the emergence of a dominant interpretation of those links as connecting one-directionally a periphery Diaspora to a center. From the perspective of communities in the making, divergent visions on the functionality of the center for Jewish continuity were explored; they implied both ideological proposals and practical imperatives that were partially reflected in the studies developed. These studies were carried out under a structural analytical perspective or by the viewpoint of the actor’s political strategies.

Simultaneously, the conceptual perspective advanced by Daniel Elazar combined political science with Jewish traditional thought and encouraged worldwide Jewish comparative studies. This approach stressed organizational relationships, power distribution and patterns of action in the Jewish collective life, highlighting Federalism as the prevailing model. Community was defined as a multidimensional matrix with an intense communication network: interacting institutions share cultural patterns, are activated by an organizational system governed by a common leadership. The community was seen as a territorial-ecological space and as a system of communication and interaction between structures and channels. Consequently, the political links of Jewish communities with their surrounding societies were defined in terms of the representation and the promotion of their collective interests by their leadership. This conception certainly coincided with the high density of Jewish life in the region organized around the main political and ideological axes of the Jewish Zionist world. Latin American Jewish life was structured around the communal rather than the congregational model; it was conceived to account for sub-ethnicities and, more significantly, in the Ashkenazi sectors, to account for political ideologies, parties and organizations. In fact, the region provided a testing case for approaches that privileged the kehila as the main analytical focus.

A new drive that fostered Latin American Jewish Studies and research developed in the United States in the early 80’s with Judith Elkin’s work and her founding of the Latin American Jewish Studies Association. Her book Jews of Latin American Republics, and the collective
work edited with Gilbert Merkx, focused on a continental vision while developed a systematic comparison between United States Jewry, - ‘the North’, and Latin American Jewry, - ‘the South’. Elkin also underscored the exogenous factors influencing these different forms of Judaism, such as the Hispanic legacy with its Catholic and medieval contents. Converging with previous approaches, her analysis pointed to the limited and partial integration of Jewish immigrants, mainly achieved in the cultural domain but also in the political one. In her view, their loyalty was permanently questioned and therefore they were seen as foreigners. Consequently, Latin Americans Jews lacked “civic assimilation”; showed low political representation and a certain vulnerability in their political life. Essentially, according to Elkin, Latin American Jews were “history’s orphans”. The vision of the South remained constantly compared to some ideal-typical understanding of Western processes. Whether due to “history by analogy”, or to the uncritical adoption of prevailing theories, the hierarchical conception of the world that represented the North as its model limited the understanding of the singularity of Jewish life in Latin America.

In the 1980s and 1990s there were few initial, though significant, regional efforts to develop social research mainly in the framework of communal structures, such as the Center for Social Studies at the AMIA, in Argentina. However, local communities failed to stimulate the development of research. Congruently with the general tendency in Latin America, Jewish leadership did not value empirical knowledge as a tool for policy making. Paradoxically, even though Jewish education and the Jewish educational system were strongly developed and showed a high institutional density, Jewish Studies and research at the higher education level, were unable to take off.

EXPANDING DISCIPLINES AND APPROACHES.

Jewish social research experienced a maturing process through new disciplinary, conceptual and methodological approaches. First and foremost, the foundation of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry stimulated the undertaking of socio-demographic studies. These gradually developed from the need to basically describe the main trends and characteristics of the Jews, toward a more complex appraisal of the interaction between Jewish communities and the surrounding societies. For example, in his analysis of the development of socio-demography in the region, Sergio DellaPergola points to the relevance of a global vision in identifying the factors that influenced the Jewish population’s main tendencies and changes in the Latin American continent. Roberto Bachi was the first to address the need for tested data on Jewish
demography, social structures and identity in order to conduct serious research and formulate communal policies. Through the Division of Jewish Demography and Statistics, he actively promoted the collection of systematic data about Latin American Jewry. Oscar Schmelz developed some of the essential cognitive tools and, above all, began a critical revision of Jewish population estimates. One characteristic of the previously prevailing estimates in Latin American countries was the supposed annual increment of their Jewish populations.

Although demographic research had been undertaken on Jews in Latin America for several decades thanks to the availability of a number of national censuses as well as Jewish community sources, an important technical and analytic turning point followed the detailed study of the 1960 census of Argentina. A rigorous analysis of the main demographic trends, the differentiation of population’s behavior at the detailed level of local geographical divisions, the analysis of social and economic stratification, and the identification of changes in the migratory patterns led to a breakdown of the dominant perceptions challenged by new data and analytical interpretations. Trends such as low fertility rates and population aging, and the possible reversion of international migration patterns were investigated and brought into the public knowledge. Following this analysis, the interaction between relevant knowledge, advanced research methods and empirical investigation was better understood and enabled a radical shift in socio-demographic research. Acknowledging that information provided by national censuses, when available, was often incomplete or seriously distorted motivated the promotion of specific Jewish population studies sponsored by communal bodies.

Equipped with advanced research methods, research in the area of population studies continued to develop. Important theoretical and practical debates progressively accompanied the development of this field, partly reflecting more general processes in the Jewish world- as illustrated in the demographic debate in the United States- and partly expressing local realities and concerns. The fact that identities and belonging have become more porous, flexible and mobile adds complexity to Jewish population studies.

Thus, in Argentina studies carried out focusing on diverse areas and dimensions of the Jewish population’s profile in the Buenos Aires metropolitan and major provincial areas. Though affected by acute economic and political crises, emigration and growing exogamy, Argentina still hosts the largest Jewish population in Latin America (slightly over 180,000) whose main characteristics continue to be investigated. The diverse studies throw light to the critical question of the mobile borders of belonging, enhanced by the decreasing rates of affiliation and exogamy. Thus, ascription and self- ascription, identity and normative criteria, subjectivity and institutional definitions have become part of the ongoing discussion. Moreover, in recent studies the contested nature of the subject is expressed in the proposals to approach
exogamy shifting the unit of analysis from individual members origins to the family identity self-adscription.

Brazil also became a laboratory of systematic demographic research in light of the changing parameters of organized Jewish life, social interaction, patterns of exogamy and communal affiliation. Studies show the interesting case of the changing components and markers of ethnicity in a multiethnic society and lead to competing interpretations.

Mexico also conducted a foundational socio-demographic study in 1991 under the guidance of Sergio Della Pergola and Susana Lerner. Later updating of the data was handled directly by Jewish institutions and ceased to be part of a joint venture between academics and the community, loosing thus the useful convergences of academia and communal bodies. The question of knowledge and the fragmented public access to it by different community sectors or researches has been part of a political centralized consensus built among the diverse sectors though and sub-ethnicities that constitute this “community of communities”. A renewed collaboration will hopefully be reestablished soon.

Other communities in countries such as Chile, Uruguay and Venezuela also sponsored socio-demographic studies in order to assess their changing profiles reflecting local, regional and global processes as well as longer-term historical constraints and opportunities presented by new and significant migratory processes. These studies shed light both on the shared trends of the communities in the region and in the Jewish world, and on the national and local differences.

Historically, the growth of Latin American Jewry resulted from large-scale immigration waves. In recent decades, Jews from Latin America have migrated and relocated their individual and communal life in other territories. The rates of emigration and exogamy as well as the impact of the cyclical crises on the organized Jewish life, which acted as powerful factors of differentiation, were revealed by the research. Uruguay and Colombia experienced a sustained decline; Brazil, Mexico and Venezuela experienced diverse degrees of growth and, thereafter, a differentiated decline, specifically in the latter case. Panama remains the only country in Latin America that has significantly increased its Jewish population since 1970. The demographic profile of Jewish populations in Mexico and Venezuela has been more stable due to more traditional socio-demographic patterns and the influx of Jews from other parts of Latin America.

From the perspective of organized Jewish life, while widening the domains where collective energies are channeled, Argentina and Brazil represent centrifugal organizational models, while Mexico epitomizes a more centralized model with an inner diversified structural profile. A high institutional density characterizes this “community of communities,” in which average affiliation remains at 80%. In contrast, the average affiliation rate diminished to 50% in
Argentina. Thus, diversified scenarios are reflected in the studies carried as well as in the academic and public discourse. As in other Jewish communities outside the region and academic settings, the criticism of communal policies regarding criteria of belonging may overlap with rigorous institutional research, which should not omit the organized sphere of collective life without risking full understanding.

Furthermore, growing social interactions are leading to an expansion of comparative studies that cover non-Jewish groups, a dimension that is required conceptually and methodologically. These studies show both valuable insights and reductionist analyses. Certainly, significant perspectives highlighted the singularity of historical connections between ethnicity and dispersion that were expressed, for instance, in the concept of “archetypal diasporas,” such as the Jewish one (but also the Armenian), or the functional formulation shared by various ethnic collectives falling into the category of “middle ground” groups. However, cultural attributes, internal cohesion and organizational patterns, as well as objective visibility have played a crucial role in the differential impact of external conditions on minorities. Comparative approaches are indeed relevant in the research about Latin America Jewish identity. Research has fluctuated between those approaches that stress structural aspects and the ones that focus on instrumental, cultural, or symbolic dimensions. The concept of ethnicity points to a wide spectrum of cultural realities, which include other migratory groups or indigenous minorities that are studied under the theoretical paradigm advanced by anthropology. However, while the heuristic advantages of broadening the topics and referents of the research of Jewish identity are evident, the ideological motives and methodological weakness of such approaches come to the forefront when excluding parallel and systematic comparisons of Jewish life across national and regional settings. It is precisely the interaction between the national dimensions and the Diaspora or the transnational dimensions that make Jewish life a unique and universal case study. This dilemmatic dimension became part of ongoing debates in the academic community. Arguments that underscore the national realm and the privatization of Jewish individual identity seemingly correspond to radical and progressive positions. Paradoxically, they replicate the traditional theoretical and practical statements of liberalism that assume that all attributes of citizenship should be subsumed in a national identity and that the public sphere (the universal) should be separated from the private, (the particular), the communal. Collective membership— including ethnic, civic, group and national layers of belongingness—has been informed by a shared and unique tension between being equal/being different. This tension has been expressed in singular cultural, social, historical and religious codes.
Demography is probably the area that reflects in more visible and acute terms the relations and tensions between meta-theoretical assumptions, scientific knowledge and data, and public communal interests. Jewish leadership was interested in promoting a public image of permanent growth not only because it reflected a powerful status but also because its capability to provide services depended on financing from international institutional sources that seriously interfered when it came to assess the size of the relevant Jewish populations. The dialectical relationship between demographic findings and public narratives persisted in the communal discourse and in the interactions between Jews and non-Jews. The structural characteristics of Latin America that were expressed nationally, and the notable public energy of Jewish life have influenced and promoted a generalized perception of a numerically larger Jewish presence. Sustained tensions emerged form the contradictory logics that developed between the need to maintain a public image of power and status and the desire to benefit from financial support, on the one hand, and the need to have reliable data to inform and guide sensitive and realistic communal policies, on the other hand. In the social representation of reality, facts played a significant role in the Jewish community’s self-definition and interaction with its surroundings. In the end, the recognition of a pronounced drop in the numbers of Jewish populations in the region became part of the research findings of scholars and of the self-understanding of the communities' leadership.

New conceptions of nationality and cultural diversity, as well as interactions between the public and private spheres expanded the community’s borders in its integration process. As previously stated, insofar as social collective and personal interactions became more fluid and natural, and as limits between social and cultural groups became more diffused and porous, the task of studying the collective and its borders became more complex. Therefore, the changing character of Jewish communities and identities acquired a challenging and prominent place in the new research agenda. Part of this research agenda was a twofold process of individualization and transformation of the organized Jewish communities. The situation of non affiliated Jews, a growing reality –especially in the Southern Cone-, is intertwined with definitions of the Jewish condition and, certainly, with belonging criteria and axes. Debates on the interaction between culture and ethnicity, religion and secularity, religious currents and conversion, institutional adscription or non-affiliated options is becoming part of both the new realities of Latin American Jewry and the research focus. One should underscore that amid these relevant and pertinent analyses and controversies, it is required an historical perspective on the transformations that are taking place. It therefore calls for cognitive awareness of the limitations of anachronistic critics vis-à-vis the research of organized Jewish life: the argument claiming that research has concentrated exclusively in the formally constituted community and ignored non affiliated Jews does not take into account the methodology that built representative samples
nor the historical processes that modified the scope and rate of the organized and affiliated Jewish world. The public communal debate has certainly both nourished and permeated these arguments. Historically, the percentages of affiliated and non-affiliated Jews have changed and, thus, critiques of past research as only focusing on the formally organized Jewish life are partial/limited and anachronistic. The arguments underlying such critiques do not take into consideration the methodology that designed particular representative samples and/or the historical processes previously mentioned. Clearly, the public communal debate informed and permeated/influenced these arguments. Historically, population and Jewish organized life overlapped.

THE INSTITUTIONAL FACTOR- A DETOUR

Latin American Jewish social studies and research have experienced a slow institutionalization process in academic settings. Thus, the field’s growth depended mostly on either the work of independent researchers supported by communal initiatives or the faculty with a disciplinary adscription and who specialized in this area. Two professional associations benefited and contributed to the field’s expansion: the Israeli Association of Latin American Researchers (AMILAT), established in 1975 by graduates and advanced students of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry and the Latin American Jewish Studies Association (LAJSA), founded in 1982 by Judith Laikin Elkin of Michigan University. Their sustained activities, scientific conferences and congresses have been a relevant space for the advancement of the area in the United States as well as in the region. Both associations brought together, with their different profiles, Judaic and Latin American Studies. While AMILAT has emphasized the relevance of the former to advance regional knowledge, LAJSA has prioritized the latter as the theoretical/regional framework. Differences between the research developed by AMILAT and LAJSA are not only or even mainly theoretical and conceptual, but also result from diverse paths and degrees of institutionalization. In the United States, the main developments in the field have taken place in the departments of language and literature, and, thereafter, in cultural studies.

In the 1990s, following the same path of cultural studies that focused on the literature of minorities, Latin American Jewish studies in the United States expanded mainly in the literary area, as can be seen in the research of academics closely related to LAJSA. In addition to the Latin American Jewish literary boom, the mode of incorporation through Spanish and Portuguese departments lies behind this research trend. As it has been correctly underscored, the
main underlying conceptual premises of the literary research and studies follow the North American tradition expressed by concepts such as Diaspora, exile, immigration, anti-Semitism, assimilation and *mestizaje*... a “living in the hyphen” code. Thus, ethnic and cultural studies overshadow other theoretical and methodological approaches while projecting the dominance of a “Latino” and “Jewish” worlds imagined by literary narratives. Radicalized constructivist approaches to ethnicity and identity are expressed in the questioning of concepts such as Jew, Jews and Jewishness in order to “denaturalize” their meaning and thus challenge alleged essentialist assumptions. Literary studies have thus become an important point of entry to the research of Jewish life and identities and its expansion is worth to underscore. New generations of scholars have turned into the field both reflecting and defining the growing influence of Latin American culture in the United States. Multicultural motives in the literary creation of Jews and the function of Jews as a *litmus test* for cultural difference and multiculturalism seems to acquire a growing relevance, partially paralleling the cultural production of North American Jews and its place in general society.

Studies sought to underscore -and simultaneously shape- the old-new identity construct that has certainly developed and the new interaction between the national and transnational dimensions of Latin American Jews in the United States. Both the diverse national Jewish belongingness as part of the Latino (Hispanic) world and the transnational dimension of the Jewish condition interact in a highly mobile milieu that is complex and problematic given the non-symmetric nature of encounters and interactions. The essential interplay between difference vis-à-vis the Latino/Hispanic migratory world and vis-à-vis the American Jewish community and other groups of immigrants marks a new reality that, as we will further address, is still in need of integrative research. Thus, other disciplinary approaches are required in order to reconsider the transformation of the concept of Hispanic/Latino categorization and the place of Hispanic culture in the reconstruction of a new transnational identity of Latin American Jews in the U.S. New research question derive from the specific context of the United States related to the objective and subjective interplay between identity referents and marks- Hispanic, Latino, Spanish, Latin American and Jewishness.

Also the pace of establishment of academic units in the field in Latin American universities has been a crucial factor for the development of the area. Although the impulse has been directed mostly to teaching, research has also gradually been addressed. This is exemplified by institutions such as the Center for Judaic Studies at the Universities of Sao Paolo and Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil; the Judaic Studies Center at the University of Chile; the Judaic Studies Program at Iberoamericana University and Universidad Hebraica, in Mexico, and in Argentina among others, the Tres de Febrero University and more recently the Núcleo de Estudios...
Judaicos at the IDES. Still, the dominant research trend is associated to individual disciplinary ascriptions.

Finally, in Israel, Latin American Jewish studies have also expanded and oscillated between the initial foundational impulse already referred to, and the progressive diversification of theoretical approaches and institutional spaces. One may observe the persistent dynamics sometimes still defined as dilemmatic options between Judaic Studies or Latin American Studies and its consequent meta-theoretical assumptions and research policy implications.

HISTORY/SOCIAL SCIENCES. A STRONG CONNECTION

The growth and expansion of the field continued to be closely related to the central role of history. Influenced by this discipline, crucial phases in the development of Jewish life in the region were investigated. For example, the study of Latin America’s immigration policies and the role of rescue during the Holocaust acquired a relevant place in research conducted with a comparative focus. By contrast, the proliferation of research on anti-Semitism has focused less on comparisons within and/or outside the continent. Historical and socio-political studies of European fascism and its impact on nationalist and populist Latin American regimes (1930s-1950s) centered on specific national settings and placed a strong emphasis on ideology and social history. Recently, growing attention has been channeled to the elaboration of quantitative indexes that enable comparative research, such as the periodic reports published by the Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Anti-Semitism and Racism at Tel Aviv University and the Vidal Sasson International Center for the Study of Anti-Semitism (SICSA) at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Still, more in depth conceptualization and theoretical formulations are required to address anti-Semitism in the region and the world. Both The Centro de Estudios Sociales (CES-DAIA) in Argentina and Tribuna Israelita in Mexico have published periodic reports on anti-Semitic incidents that also include socio-political analyses. Only recently, studies on anti-Semitism have become part of a broader spectrum of investigation dealing with parameters of inclusion and exclusion. This perspective considers the interfacing between national, social, and political anti-Semitism, as well as the acceptance-rejection dynamics. Diffuse and latent prejudices, veiled and structural ones, as well as those negated in the official semantics but evident in the rhetoric of individuals and of collective sectors are yet to be identified by serious studies. The historical course of this rhetoric, which does not necessarily translate into discriminatory practices, needs to be contextualized within each country’s political culture that promotes or controls impunity, one that respects or violates human rights.
Anti-Semitism had a strong impact on the social representation of the “other”. And yet, it hardly covers the public space where civic-national commonalities legitimately express difference. Concern has been voiced about an excessive focus on anti-Semitism as the primary characteristic of the continent, warning against a simplistic and reductionist identification of Latin America with intolerance and anti-Jewish displays. This critique calls for more balanced and nuanced distinctions between different times, places, and modalities of Anti-Semitism. As stated, we still face the challenge of linking standardized formalized criteria with comprehensive theoretical approaches that account for changing meanings of the phenomenon locally, regionally and globally. Political regimes have posed diverse challenges to scholars focusing their studies on the collective action and the political practices of community leaders and individual members. Authoritarian and military regimes in the Southern Cone have been analyzed from different perspectives which cover communal and civil demands, the role of actors, the behavior of individual and communities, the alliances and the place of the organized Jewish world, emphasizing the wide political and ideological spectrum of local, provincial, and national political action. Research based on new archival material offers progressive insights and defying interpretations.

As a younger generation of scholars enters the field from different perspectives, academic institutions and national settings, the debate widens to confront Jewish modernity with post-modern discourses. Constructivism has gradually challenged hard-core components of Jewish identity and ethnicity while this approach puts into question marks the analytical validity of the concept of Jewish people. Debates that are not particular to the Latin American context, acquire in the region a more acute and singular relevance insofar as the modern and the post-modern coexist with pre-modern conditions. Accompanying these debates, meta-theoretical assumptions come to the forefront as expressed either in a rigorous and emphatic challenge to account for historical continuity or in a critical stance towards the strong weight of the past that is seen as particularistic and regressive.

A CONCEPTUAL SHIFT. THE TRANSNATIONAL PARADIGM

While a comparative perspective of the Jewish world guided the first studies in the field, transnationalism provides today a conceptual framework that opens up new theoretical and methodological venues related to the profiles and borders of Latin American Jewish communities. A transnational approach, partly enhanced by globalization theories, reformulates the scope of the concept of Diaspora and its underlying assumptions. It underscores bordered
and bounded social and communal units as trans-nationally constituted spaces interacting with one another. Transnationalism constitutes a conceptual perspective with relevant implications for social (and communal) morphology expressed in the changing character of social formations, and their membership criteria.

Transnational social spaces, fields and formations are mainly constituted by migrant’s practices that link emigration and immigration countries, as well as the transfer and re-transfer of culture and values. Thus, a dual condition that involves both dispersion and national belonging is highlighted and influences the ways in which communal membership might be modified. Therefore, it calls for research on present transformations in Latin American Jewish communities as well as for a new understanding of the past transnational character of Jewish life in the region. The Jewish reality is paradigmatic of the changes in identity studies that had previously linked community structures and institutional spaces. New ways of connecting ethnicity/nationality and citizenship evolve in a complex dynamic of unprecedented forms of nationalism and transnationalism, triggering reflection about their mutual relationships. This conceptual shift enables the continued exploration of Latin American Jewish life within the borders of the nation-state. Narratives and parameters of Jewish identities are built in a context of revival, transformation, negotiation, and blurring. Social sciences face the need to expand their disciplinary borders to include culture as deeply implicated in the dialectic of de-territorialization and re-territorialization that accompanies globalization. This entails “the loss of a natural relation between culture and geographical and social territories, and a partial territorial relocation of old and new symbolic productions”.

Investigating the conditions under which old identities prevail, new symbolic ones emerge, borders expand or contract and boundaries are redefined becomes even more central to Jewish social research. This conceptual shift is relevant from an angle of migratory movements: during the past 40 years, more than 150,000 Jews emigrated from Latin American countries leading to a significant reduction in the number of Jews in the region from 514,000 in 1970 to 390,000 in 2010. The contradictory trends that have characterized the region- democratization and de-democratization, liberalization and economic crises, emerging civil societies and political instability, high levels of public violence and lack of security- have increasingly exposed Latin America and its Jewish communities to migration waves and to multiple experiences of leaving and joining, constructing “homeness” and perceiving exile. These processes gave rise to contrasting realities of shrinking Jewish communities, and revitalized Jewish life both in the region and abroad. Thus, analyzing contemporary Latin American Jewry – Jewish communities and individuals inhabiting the region as well as migrant communities- requires extending the focus of research to four regions: Latin America, North America, Western Europe, and the
Middle East represented by Israel. From an analytical perspective, in the first place these movements should viewed related to the nature and outcomes of the cycle of migration "crises" that historically took place in nearly all Latin American countries and affected Jews over the time. Migration crises, is an important analytical concept for studying emigration, dispersal and regrouping of migrant communities were shaped worldwide by macro-level forces of political and economical nature. In Latin America, they were of different nature and scope and had a differential impact on Jewish communities and their diverse sectors. One type encompassed forced migration and exile of individuals under high risk, such as politically involved activists and intellectuals in the Southern Cone. Another type was characterized by voluntary household decisions to emigrate, taking into consideration safety, security, and economic reasons. Still others added to the previous determinants a more significant consideration of ideational drivers, such as proximity to particular loci for enhancing Jewish identity, the availability of Jewish educational frameworks, the future of a next generation, and more. Thus, research is further needed in order to explore beyond the collective push-pull drivers of migration, the more particular Jewish collective dimensions as well as the individual ones of forced and free-choice migration. It entails developing further conceptual formulations connected to the paradigm shift we witness in contemporary social theory to elaborate pluralistic approaches that simultaneously take into account agency and structure.

Amid an interconnected world that demands rethinking the relations between territory, culture and identity, different identification/cultural/geographical moments of the transnational world –home(s)-abroad- may be traced back to Latin American Jews. Whereas social and geographical belonging borders are mobile, socio-demographic research on communities and identities faces new conceptual and methodological challenges- when explaining ethno-religious-cultural territorial population borders. The binomial home-abroad posits new questions and research routes so that research of Latin American Jewry shares with social sciences the need to overcome the burden of “methodological nationalism”. Diaspora and Transnationalism are central concepts both to Jewish social research and social sciences. The clarity and rigor in the usage of these terms, their convergences and divergences, similarities and differences become a necessary research axis. According to Faist, the two concepts cannot be separated in any serious way and, their meaning can only be inferred from the ways in which they are used. Thus, while older notions of Diaspora implied a return to a real or imagined homeland, newer uses replace return with dense and continuous linkages across borders. Moreover, these uses overcome the binomial origin-destination and include countries of onward migration, bringing into account lateral ties. Even wider uses indicate a Diaspora experience of all mobile persons as trans-national.
Thus, the research agenda must include the mapping the new relocation of Latin American Jews moving inside Latin America (such as – in the past – from Argentina to Mexico or from Uruguay to Venezuela) and outside Latin America, mainly to the United States and Israel. Research also needs to address the reconstruction of the main transnational networks following their relocation, including the intensity of persisting relations with the countries of origin and consequently the need to differentiate and relate chain migrations, migrants regrouping and processes of re-diasporization or de-diasporization. These new topics claim social and demographic perspectives and analytical tools that respond to the redefinition of spaces and territories. Concerning the incorporation of migrants and minorities at large, the Jewish experience in general and the Latin American specifically represent meaningful cases of continuity, distinctiveness and boundary maintenance. Thus, issues of construction, resilience, transformation, competition and reconstitution both of communal life and of identities under the impact of relocation, migration, dual residency (and emergence or decline of nation-state imaginaries) provide new focus of research. Analysis of Jewish perceptions, collective accommodation, and communal action in the different spheres and dimension- national/local and transnational/global- appears as increasingly necessary.

Both old and new configurations of transnationalism are interwoven and marked by singular processes of Jewish-life building. In this context, the State of Israel and the Jewish/Zionist ethos have played a catalyst, singular role widely researched by Latin American scholars. Political concepts, values, aspirations and organizational entities imported from previous Jewish experiences in other parts of the world played a fundamental role in the process of cultural and institutional formation of Jewish communities in Latin America – perhaps even more than in other regions of Jewish immigration such as Western Europe or North America. In this sense, the perception of a dialectical relationship between a perceived ideal "center" in Palestine/Israel and Latin America as one expression of ideal "periphery" was probably more diffused and acute in this region than elsewhere. However, in recent decades, the social, cultural and political transformations related to diffused patterns of international migration call for a serious and critical reconsideration of an earlier bi-polar model in light of a Jewish collective reality that has increasingly become multi-centered and demands to examine the multiple identities, the institutional options, the transnational ideational motives and relational networks that have emerged, thus posing still new agendas to research.

FINAL REMARKS
Latin American Jewish social research reflects a non-lineal trajectory and faces today new challenges that in some instances respond to the need for appropriate conceptual and methodological bridges required by a trans-disciplinary field. Increased efforts of articulation are required in order to move across analytical levels: from the individual to the collective; from community to society and to the nation and the state, and from the latter to the global and the transnational.

The field faces today the need for sustained research and mature conceptualization: theoretical knowledge offers the realm where concepts, hypotheses and findings interact and therefore allows for dialogue (through continuity or ruptures) among different approaches that both share common denominators and exhibit discrepancies. The complexity acquired by the field puts into question a logic of “or” and “either” and looks for inclusive perspectives. Binomials such as exogenous/endogenous; minority/nation; religion/secularism are contested by reality and by research. The social’s wider limits allow the entry of new subjects into social research designs.

One exemplary terrain where general and particular trends converge is represented by religion and the religious transformations of Jewish life in Latin America and worldwide. The interplay between historical ethno-national components of identity and new religious flows claims for research committed to account for this subject as “one of the main protagonists in this unbinding of culture and its traditional referents and boundaries, as well as its reattachment into new space-time configurations”. While historically, religion played a minor role in mainly secular communities, processes across the region and the Jewish world point to an increasing weight of religious claims/affirmation in the public domain, leading to the so-called ‘de-privatization’ of religion. While during the 1960s the Conservative movement mobilized thousands of otherwise non-affiliated Jews into Jewish life, in recent years, in tandem with changing trends in world Jewry, Orthodox groups have formed new religious congregations. Today, the expansion of Chabad and its centers, both in large and well-established communities, and also in smaller ones, modifies the Latin American Jewish landscape. These tendencies are both a source of an ongoing debate among academic communities as well as the new focus of research projects. Empirical research informs the academic research agendas and communal public debates.

Similar to Argentina, where the central communal organization AMIA has shown that the Orthodox sectors “conquer the community” -an expression that the Zionists made part of their strategy to build their hegemony- –and where in the last elections (2011) competing religious forces came to the forefront- Brazil and Mexico show in their own ways significant trends that point to a significant move towards a religious presence. Thus, in Mexico, categories such as ‘very observant’ and ‘observant’ expanded from 4.3% to 7%, and from 6.7% to 17%,
respectively, representing an overall growth of almost 300%. In contrast, ‘traditionalists’, who still represent the majority of the Mexican Jewish population, experienced a reduction from 76.8% to 62%. When analyzing the population below 40 years of age, these trends appear even more acute: for ‘very observant’ there is an increase from 7 to 12%; the ‘observant’ category grows from 17 to 20%, while ‘traditionalists’ drop from 62% to 59%. The extreme religious factions and self-segregation strategies are still marginal in Jewish life in the region; however, their growing presence points to new processes and tendencies that certainly influence the scope and shape of Jewish identities. Brazil shows strong trends to orthodoxy and Hazara be-Tshuva movements.

Having previously referred to the need to guarantee a serious comparative approach that takes into consideration the specificity and distinctiveness of the object of study, it is equally important to affirm the need to widen the comparative study range of groups and referents. The foundational character that past and present migratory experiences have in shaping the character of the Jewish collective, demands rigorous comparisons of assimilation patterns, hybridity, reconfiguration processes and changing ethnic profiles. It also demands to compare and contrast recent Jewish emigration flows from the region with general migration waves of Latin Americans and with Jews worldwide. Concurrently, one has to bear in mind the paradigmatic nature of the Latin American Jewish ethno-diaspora as an exemplary group of the transnational moment in the 21st century. In parallel, research needs to further focus on sub-ethnicity and its impact on the changing composition of Jewish communities.

Latin American Jewish social science studies and research aspire to have a greater scientific and communal impact, a twofold goal that requires establishing procedures that link their new findings with appropriate institutional spaces. In the framework of a diversified Jewish world composed of voluntary and compulsory units, primordial and elective foci of identities, associative and institutionalized structures, new trends of theoretical knowledge and applied research that inform policies need to address inner diversity in differential ways. Researchers have to be aware that their work has to do with inclusion or exclusion categories and also with measures that delineate the contours of Jewish peoplehood. Therefore, today’s agenda faces challenges stemming from cognitive and scientific criteria, as well as from the academic and communal spaces that, often contradictory, may grant the field’s reproduction and renewal.

Previous formulations by the author on the subject provide a starting point for this article. Cfr. “Latin American Jewish Studies Today”, (Research Conference, CUNY, March 2008); and


8 Natan Lerner, Jewish Organization in Latin America (Tel Aviv: David Horowitz Institute/Tel Aviv University: 1974); David Schers y Hadassa Singer, “The Jewish Communities of Latin America: External and Internal Factors in Their Development”, Jewish Social Studies 39 (Summer 1977), 241-258; Henrique Rattner, Tradição e mudança: A comunidade judaica em


13 Ibid.


15 U.O. Schmelz y Sergio DellaPergola, *Demografía de los judíos en Argentina y otros países de Latinoamérica*, (Tel Aviv, Tel Aviv University, Instituto Horowitz, 1974) [Hebrew].


21 See Instituto Nacional de Estadistica, Geografia e Informatica, XII Censo General de Población y Vivienda 2000 (México City, 2002). Comité Central Israelita de México, Estudio

22 Gabriel Berger et al., Estudio Socio-Demográfico de la Comunidad Judía de Chile (Santiago-Buenos Aires, 1995). Nicole Berenstein and Rafael Porzecanski, Perfil de los egresados de la Red Formal de Educación Judía Uruguaya (Montevideo, 2001). Sergio DellaPergola, Salomon Benzaquen, and Tony Beker de Weinraub, Perfil sociodemográfico y cultural de la comunidad judía de Caracas (Caracas, 2000). The survey was sponsored by the Asociación Israelita de Venezuela, the Union Israelita de Caracas, and the Asociación de Amigos de la Universidad Hebrea de Jerusalén.

23 Sergio DellaPergola, Ibid.


26 Alejandro Dujovne, Daniel Goldaman and Darío Sztajnszrajber, Pense lo Judío en la Argentina el Siglo XXI, (Capital Intelectual: 2011)


31 As observed by Haim Avni, in 1992, after six congresses held by the two associations and two volumes published by AMILAT, the papers and articles reached the number of 178. By 1992, as Haim Avni pointed out, six congresses held by the two professional associations together with two volumes published by AMILAT produced an unprecedented number of
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papers and articles (178). However, only few studies focused in the period post 1948 and the study of Latin American Jewish communities remained. 17 years after their creation, both organizations have organized 13 congresses that expanded and widened the research subjects paving the way not only for divergences but also for new convergences. Cfr. Haim Avni, “Postwar Latin American Jewry: An Agenda for the Study of the Last Five Decades”, en Sheinin y Baer Barr, The Jewish Diaspora in Latin America, op. cit., pp. 3-19.

32 Vid. Reflexiones sobre enseñanza e investigación académica del judaísmo latinoamericano (Reflexions on Teaching and Research of Latin American Jewry,(Report presented to the XIII Congress of LAJSA, Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Division of Latin America, Spain and Portugal 2007)


anyone who considers him/herself to be Hispanic or Latino is indeed defined as Hispanic or Latino, which therefore can also include persons of Portuguese and/or Brazilian descent.


43 Nicolas Van Hear, New Diasporas. The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant


52 Comité Central Israelita de México, Socio-demographic Study of the Mexican Jewish Community, 2006.

