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Reviews: Migration, ethnic lives and communalism

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Haim Avni, Judit Bokser Liwerant, Sergio Della Pergola, Margalit Bejarano and Leonardo Senkman (eds),
Pertenencia y alteridad. Judíos en I de America Latina: cuarenta años de cambios,
Iberoamericana-Vervuert- Bonilla Artigas Editores: Madrid, 2011; 872 pp.: ISBN
9788484895183, US\$64.00

Reviewed by Carlos H Waisman, *University of California, San Diego, USA*

Keywords

Diaspora, Jewish communities, Latin America

This is the most comprehensive analysis of trends in the size, composition, organization, collective identity, and cultural production of Jewish communities in Latin America since 1970. The period chosen by the editors makes sense because of two factors: the major economic and political transformations in the continent in the past four decades, and the important changes in some of the central characteristics of Jewish communities within this time frame.

In these years, Latin American societies experienced the exhaustion of the etatist import-substitution strategy of industrialization, economic liberalization (what in the region is commonly called ‘neoliberalism’), and more recently an economic bifurcation: the strengthening of open-market economies in some countries, and the re-emergence of economic nationalism and etatism in others (the economic policies usually called ‘populist’). Politically, this was a turbulent period in most countries: authoritarian regimes, some of which were highly coercive, came to power in most Latin American countries in the 1970s, usually as a response to revolutionary threats (some real, some imaginary) fueled by the Cuban Revolution and the Cold War. These regimes collapsed in the 1980s, and transitions to democracy began in almost all of Latin America. This includes even Mexico, whose long-lasting civilian authoritarian regime also foundered. The resulting democracies are of varying quality, in terms of the strength of their rule of law and their republicanism, a term that in presidential regimes refers to the existence of an effective separation of powers.

At the same time, there were major changes in the Jewish communities, the largest of which are in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. Jews had lived in Latin America in colonial times, usually as crypto-Jews, due to the fact that Spanish and Portuguese rulers banned

Judaism (and the other non-Catholic religions) from their empires. Jews, together with Muslims, had been expelled from Spain the same year in which Columbus discovered the new continent. Even converts to Catholicism faced all kinds of restrictions, and were subject to the Inquisition. Contemporary communities originated mostly with large-scale immigration, especially to Argentina and other parts of the Southern Cone and Brazil, at the time of the great European migratory wave of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As was the case in the US, most Jews emigrated from Eastern Europe (Russia and Poland), escaping persecution and poverty. Smaller numbers originated in Germany and in the Ottoman Empire. Also as in the US, most were Ashkenazi, a large proportion of them Yiddish-speaking, but there was also a large minority of Sephardic or Oriental Jews from the Ottoman Empire, whose language was either Ladino, an archaic form of Spanish, or Arabic.

Around 1970, there were around 600,000 Jews in Latin America, over half of them in Argentina. At present, the figure is one-third lower, as a consequence of both assimilation and emigration from the region. The decline has been very large in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, over a third in all cases, but community size has increased in Brazil and Mexico. While in 1970 first-generation immigrants still constituted a substantial proportion of the Jewish population, currently almost all Jews, in the countries with the largest communities, are locally born. These people are much more involved than the first generation in the politics and culture of their societies, and the proportion of them strongly attached to Zionism and Israel has been declining. In Argentina, in particular, enrollment in Jewish schools has also been greatly reduced. Finally, and in all countries, religiosity has been growing, especially in its ultra-orthodox forms. Most Jews, however, remain strongly secular.

In the beginning of the period, Jewish communities were firmly ensconced in the middle and upper middle classes as well as the professions and the intelligentsia, and they shared the economic and political fate of these strata in their societies. Large segments of these communities benefitted from economic liberalization since the 1980s and prospered, but substantial groups experienced downward mobility, especially in Argentina, whose default in 2002 had catastrophic consequences for much of this country's middle classes. In politics, Jewish orientations mirrored those of the middle and upper middle classes and the intelligentsia in their countries: they were found among the supporters of authoritarian governments, in the neutral middle ground, and in the radical Left whose mobilization or alleged mobilization potential triggered the establishment of these governments, and that fought against them. In Argentina, Jews were strongly overrepresented among the victims of the military regime, the 'disappeared' in particular, a fact that indicates, up to that time, the survival of anti-Semitic orientations within the armed forces and the security apparatus in that country.

Like the other members of their social classes, Jews enthusiastically embraced the new democratic regimes. After the collapse of Communism and the end of the Cold War, Latin American political communities were reconfigured, and centrist forces of different persuasions became predominant, except in some of the countries with populist governments. Most Jews support now centrist or center-left parties. But it was in the newly democratic environment that the most serious anti-Semitic attack in Latin American history took place: the bombing of the main Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in

1994, which left 85 dead and hundreds injured. The Argentine government has blamed Iran for this attack. However, with the decline of Catholic theological anti-Semitism following the II Vatican Council and the disintegration of right-wing nationalism and similar radical ideologies, the domestic sources of anti-Jewish mentalities have been dramatically weakened. The exception is Venezuela, where the small Jewish community has had a rocky relationship with the Chavez administration, whose alignment with Iran is an important dimension of its foreign policy.

This book will be of interest, first, to the students of Jewish communities. The 30 articles in the volume discuss the history of Jewish immigration in Latin America, the size and ethnic composition (Ashkenazi and Sephardic or Oriental) of the communities, the effects upon them of economic and political change in their countries since the 1970s, the relationship between the Latin American communities and international Jewish organizations and Israeli agencies, trends in Jewish education and in religiosity, the various collective identities within the communities, Jewish contributions to the national and international Jewish literatures, and even Latin American emigration to Israel. Taken together, the articles examine the Jews from two perspectives: as members of their societies and as part of the Jewish diaspora. The discussion of trends in Jewish ethnic and religious education and of the literary life of the Jewish communities is especially detailed.

For sociologists in general, the main appeal of this collection will be its focus on the collective identity of a diasporic community. Such communities have been present in many societies for thousands of years, but their number and size has grown dramatically in the contemporary wave of globalization. Their members' collective identities are Janus-like, facing two poles, which represent the extreme outcomes of the diasporic situation: total cultural assimilation into the host societies, and the maintenance of a separate identity. The first alternative implies the disappearance of the community, at least as a community 'for itself', in the Marxist sense of the term. Of course, the host society may still regard the group as 'other', as Jews have learned in their long and complicated history. The second option may involve different forms of cultural affirmation, either religious or secular.

Really existing collective identities, as the editors of this volume assert in their Introduction, are quite complex. They involve different degrees of 'consciousness, strength, centrality, and valence' (p. 68). The variety of mentalities discussed in the volume suggests some additional classifications, beyond the binary distinction above, which represents the extreme values of a variation in cultural space. Individuals who consider themselves primarily members of an international diasporic community, rather than of the societies where they have been born and live, may do so in ways varying in terms of cultural time. They may either construct an identity based on the current prevailing culture in their homeland or in other fragments of the diaspora, or on an older, more traditional version of this culture. In the latter case, there is still a possible distinction, based on the degree of realism of this construction: the extent to which this frame is a reasonable representation, even if updated, of past culture, or a utopian elaboration based on representations that may have never existed in reality.

Several of these possibilities, or even all of them, may be present in a diasporic collectivity, and the proportion of its members whose identity is close to each of these types varies over time. The discussion of the collective identities of Jewish communities in

Latin America in many of these papers indicates that this has been the case. Thus, several contributions discuss the differences between the 'nuclear' Jewish population, made up of ethnic Jews who identify themselves as such, and the 'enlarged' one, which includes, in addition, ethnic Jews who do not consider themselves part of the community, descendants of Jews, and relatives of Jews. In the Buenos Aires urban area, these additional groups are almost as large (88%) as the core community. Besides, most of the nuclear segment consists now of people who also view themselves primarily as members of their national society.

Among those at the other pole, Jews whose main identity is diasporic, the discussion in this volume suggests a classification into three variants. The first is composed of traditionalistic Ashkenazi or Sephardic individuals, embedded in the culture of origin (even though they may have been born in their Latin American countries). An interesting subgroup in this category is that of the Yiddishists: Yiddish, the language of Eastern European Ashkenazi Jews, survived for a couple of generations in segments of the Argentine, Brazilian, Mexican, and Uruguayan populations. In several of these countries there were, up to the beginning of the period under consideration, Yiddish schools, and also newspapers, publishing houses, and theater. There was even a substantial literary production. The second group are the secular Zionists: individuals who orient themselves primarily toward Israeli society, even though many of them may have never been there and do not speak Hebrew. Finally, there is the religious group, an expanding segment of which are the ultra-orthodox, and part of whom cultivate a culture that allegedly recreates, in the contemporary world, basic traits of Jewish life in Poland and Russia prior to the twentieth century. These identities are not always mutually exclusive: for example, as is the case in the US, people could view themselves mainly as members of their host society, but still affirm a strong religious identity (usually not an ultra-orthodox one), and be strongly embedded in the subculture of a minority community.

The chapters document shifts since 1970: in at least some of these countries, e.g. Argentina, the nuclear community has been shrinking, and also the proportion of nuclear Jews who participate in organized community life. Traditionalism has also declined, as a consequence of generational change. Something similar has happened with secular Zionism as a form of ethnic identification, and the segment with a strong religious commitment has increased, even though it encompasses a minority of the community.

A review of this massive volume (872 pp.) would not be complete without addressing the questions of whether any of the topics included is redundant or dispensable, and whether any centrally important issue has been left out. In relation to the first matter, all the chapters are useful, either because of the information they contain or of their analytical apparatus. However, there is section on 'Latin America in a Comparative Perspective', which includes high-quality contributions on Jewish communities in different parts of the world. Most articles on other regions or countries do refer to Latin America, but in general they do not do so systematically. This section could have been centered on detailed paired comparisons with Latin America, or it could have been published as a separate volume.

As for topics not treated, it is obvious that a project of this type could not include every pertinent theme. However, given that the focus is on immigrant communities, the bulk of which arrived in the region in the past 60–120 years, a discussion of the

immigrants' economic and social trajectories would have been most interesting. In spite of the dualization produced by economic liberalization in most countries, and in some cases by economic crises, most of these immigrants, who were usually poor when they arrived, did very well economically, and their families underwent substantial intergenerational mobility. An analysis of the causes of these economic and social careers would address the endowment of human capital carried by these immigrants, both in terms of their general education and of their technical or commercial skills, and how this endowment fitted the configuration of human capital in the recipient societies; the effects, for social mobility, of the immigrant communities' culture and social capital; the existence or strength of social barriers to their economic or social advancement, etc. One can only hypothesize that important differences would appear among different types of immigrants and different recipient societies. It would also be intriguing to compare Jewish and other European and Middle Eastern immigrants in these regards. This is a huge topic by itself, and I suspect little systematic research has been conducted on these questions, much less so in a comparative Latin American perspective. In any case, this would be a good focus for the next project on Jewish communities in the region.

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Roma Chatterji and Deepak Mehta,

Living with Violence: An Anthropology of Events and Everyday Life, Routledge India: New Delhi, 2007; 201 pp.: ISBN 0415430801, Rs. 550

Reviewed by Manish K Verma, *Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, India*

Keywords

Babri Mosque, communal violence, Dharavi, everyday life, riots

Living with Violence is an anthology of everyday life through which communal riot is seen, understood and portrayed in a place called Dharavi, which is an overcrowded, poverty stricken and crime prone slum of Mumbai. In this book, Chatterji and Mehta attempt to provide a detailed account of the Mumbai riots of 1992–1993 between Hindus and Muslims, which began on the day of demolition of Babri Mosque (6 December 1992), and its consequential aftermath in terms of people's narratives, relief and rehabilitation work; and most importantly, issues related to governance. By adopting a sociological standpoint, the book grounds the cause of communal violence as historically rooted, culturally sanctioned and socially approved in society. The central argument of the book is that violence is an integral part of everyday life and the study of everyday life can provide a passage to inner worlds of experience of people. Due to the unfaded bitter memories of India's colonial past, entrenched suspicion, distrust and misunderstanding is crafted in the everyday lifeworld of people, eventually culminating in communal riots. The aftermath of the riots witnesses deeper division between Hindus and Muslims, which is reflected in the creation of ghettos