

The Study of Jewish Difference After 1945

Berlin, Max-Planck-Institute for the History of Science

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The proposed conference focuses on the history of scientific accounts of Jews in the life sciences after the end of World War Two. The study of Jews, contrary to common assumption, was not discontinued after WWII and the Shoah. The aim of the conference is to examine such studies in the context of deep transformations in these fields themselves, the radically altered political landscape, and the complex nexus between the two in the post-war period.

To that end, we intend to bring together for the first time historians of various branches of the life sciences from Germany and Israel (and other countries) to discuss this issue collectively. Our aim is to systematically address questions pertaining to personal, institutional, and conceptual continuities and breaks in the investigation of Jewish difference after 1945: How did life scientists after 1945 approach Jews as an object of empirical inquiry; how did they draw on – or distance from – earlier bodies of knowledge; and where can one identify new constraints or moments of break? Which disciplines and leading scientists were now involved and which no longer partook in such studies, and why? From the perspective of scientific networks, what were the significant international cooperations? At what point were German scientists, if at all, reintegrated into this international scientific network? And how can this particular history be placed within the larger framework of the history of German-Israeli scientific exchange?

The evolutionary history of humankind has been a concern of the life sciences since the late 19th century. As part of this development, and within the larger context of the biologization and medicalization of society and social questions, life scientists studied Jews and other minorities as biologically distinct groups, and their evolutionary history was integrated into the great narration of humankind.

While these trends were not unique to German science, and Jews were measured and investigated elsewhere as well, this particular bio-history was elaborated in most variegated and complex forms in the German life sciences. Authors of both non-Jewish and Jewish background partook in these scientific debates, with quite contrasting views. And only in Germany was the discourse on biological differences of Jews central to discussions of national identity and politics. Indeed, as is well known, many German life scientists enthusiastically cooperated with the National Socialist regime, which discriminated, persecuted, and murdered Jews.

After WWII and the systematic murder of European Jewry grounded on racial anti-Semitism, the discussion of the so called „Jewish race“ seems to have been immediately tabooed in the German scientific discourse. The general interest in human evolution and diversity, however, was not broken, and scientific work in human genetics and physical anthropology (as well as other related fields) resumed almost immediately after the hostilities ended.

While in Germany Jews were no longer investigated by life scientists, and were not made an issue of political or scientific discussion any more, in international life sciences they were still viewed as integral to „human evolution" and to „human diversity." Outside of Germany the study of Jewish genetic difference continued, including in the newly founded State of Israel and the United States. Research on the biology of Jews was now carried out almost exclusively with the methods of population genetics and in medical, genetics, or serological departments.

This change in the sites of the biological study of Jews occurred concurrently with certain conceptual and institutional changes within science: outside of Germany, and in particular in the United States and Britain, physical anthropology gradually declined and human population genetics gained growing scientific weight. In Germany, under the surveillance of Western allies, the reorganization of the German scientific system also included restructuring and renaming of departments and institutes of physical anthropology to human genetics. Within this wider framework, which included conceptual, institutional, and political factors, therefore, the field shifted from forms of "race science" to various kinds of genetics perspectives. While in Germany Jews were no longer a direct object of inquiry, nevertheless, after a certain time, biological knowledge about Jews reappeared through popular and scientific publications and textbooks of, for example, biological anthropology and human genetics.

Upon closer examination, however, the break of 1945 seems less clear, and the conference seeks to highlight some of the less obvious continuities involved. With regard to the methods physical anthropologists used worldwide, it is noteworthy that after the war, anthropometry was not dismissed as a method, but was instead used in very different contexts than previously. After the 1960s, it was just no longer used as a tool for investigating races, or even human genetic diversity and evolution. As mentioned above, physical anthropology did decline while population genetics gained in scientific weight, but this process was not completed before the 1960s and was a topic of heated scientific debates. Continuities with older traditions can also be found in textual and visual representations of Jews in publications of German life scientists in the second half of the 20th century. Furthermore, the way population geneticists used older biohistorical narrations and sampled their study populations seems to have continued longstanding traditions. We thus address the question to what extent the changes in this field of inquiry also had to do with inner-scientific developments.

Finally, in attempting to assess continuities and discontinuities we also wish to include historical discussion of more recent molecular genetics study of Jews.

If you want to attend the conference, please register with Birgitta von Mallinckrodt:
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