

## RETHINKING EMBOURGEOISEMENT AND THE JEWS OF GERMANY

Symposium at the Center for Jewish History, New York, April 21, 2005. Co-sponsored by the GHI and the Leo Baeck Institute. Conveners: Frank Mecklenburg (Leo Baeck Institute) and Jonathan Skolnik (GHI). Participants: Simone Lässig (GHI), Till van Rahden (University of Cologne).

The Second Joint Symposium of the Leo Baeck Institute (LBI) and the GHI was held at the LBI's new, more spacious home in the Center for Jewish History in New York. The first Joint Lecture was held at the GHI in October 2003 (see *Bulletin* 35) and featured Liliane Weissberg (University of Pennsylvania) with a commentary by Jeffrey Peck (Georgetown University). The first joint event explored the changing landscape of German-Jewish Studies, focusing on the mushrooming interest in Jewish Studies in Germany and the influence of Jewish immigration to Germany since 1989 on both conceptions of post-Holocaust German-Jewish relations and the Jewish understanding of "diaspora" in the new global reality. The Second Joint Symposium in New York provided a concrete example of the new Jewish Studies in Germany, highlighting the work of two scholars whose recent books on nineteenth-century German Jewry are moving research in that area in an important direction.

The theme of the symposium was "Rethinking Embourgeoisement." Drawing on the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital," Simone Lässig's paper argued that the story of the transformation of Jewish society in nineteenth-century Germany should be uncoupled from a binary opposition of "assimilation" to "Jewish cultural preservation." Centering her discussion around three examples—reforms in Jewish education, the reshaping of religious life, and Jewish participation in all-Jewish and integrated *Vereine*—Lässig contended that the growth of German-Jewish institutions should not be viewed as a reaction to prejudice and exclusion, but rather as a workshop or laboratory for the values, skills, and habits required for entry into the German middle class. Till van Rahden's paper noted the enduring deficit of scholarship which examines Jews as a "core group of the German middle class," despite the voluminous literature on *Bürgertum*. Reflecting broadly on developments from 1800 to 1933, van Rahden demonstrated the striking economic heterogeneity of the German-Jewish middle class and suggested that the complexity of Jewish ethnic and class identity and mobility can offer insight into the nature of class, status, and civil society as a whole. He argued in particular for a nuanced re-examination of German civil society

and its relation to minorities. Whereas van Rahden claimed that the dynamic of social and economic inclusion and exclusion was something hardly specific to Jews and invited parallels with Catholics and other groups, he was careful to identify the factors marking the German-Jewish experience as unique. The considerable political clout Jewish voters had in Imperial Germany, especially at the municipal level, was one factor; their fateful symbiosis with the left-liberal bourgeoisie (whose influence declined dramatically in the twentieth century) was another.

The two papers were rich in detail and conceptually ambitious; together they are evidence of a powerful blend of social and cultural history that rethinks both the long-dominant narrative of German-Jewish "assimilation" as well as more recent attempts to conceptualize the German-Jewish milieu as a "subculture." Both presentations raised many new questions, most importantly regarding how to think about prejudice and anti-Semitism at the same time that German-Jewish social advancement is studied in more detail. The questions from the audience opened an equally important dimension: How does the German example compare with other Western European nations? With the Jewish experience in the Americas? In Eastern Europe? Perhaps comparative history based in part on the German-Jewish experience might serve as a theme for a future joint symposium.

*Jonathan Skolnik*