

**Agents of Cultural Change: Jewish and other Responses to Modernity,
ca. 1750–1900**

International Conference, Washington, DC, October 8–10, 2018

Conveners:

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Everyday language posits a dichotomy between the traditional and the new, but as Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger taught us, ostensible traditions can be modern responses to new challenges. We have to be careful about easy dichotomies that assume the apparently old is really that. Educational, religious, and other cultural practices that appear to merely manifest the old can very well represent innovative adaptations of the traditional in response to new social, cultural, political, and economic challenges. This is the premise of the German–Israeli research project “Innovation through Tradition? Jewish Educational Media and Cultural Transformation in the Face of Modernity” (<http://innovation-through-tradition.ghi-dc.org>).

Adopting the perspective of this DFG-funded project, our conference starts from the assumption that the history of Ashkenazi Jewry in German-speaking Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries can offer not only new insights into Jewish history but also an exciting point of departure for more general questions about the resilience and coping strategies that groups develop when confronted with deep-reaching, sometimes existence-threatening social change in an increasingly complex world. The conference asks how members of a distinctive socio-cultural system—characterized by a particular set of linguistic practices, cultural meanings, religious practices, and knowledge orders—transformed that system. Further, it seeks to understand how members of this system communicated and translated major changes, how they made them socially relevant and acceptable.

Exploring these questions on the basis of a variety of sources and perspectives, we are particularly interested in processes of cultural translation and knowledge production. Although Jewish history is the point of departure in our research, this conference aims at a broader perspective and will focus on entanglements and comparisons of Jewish and other responses to modernity. Thus, we encourage proposals for papers that address the full sweep of the modern religio-cultural landscape—especially in the German-speaking territories—and that offer conference participants a chance to relate Jewish historical experiences to broader aspects of cultural transfer and translation. We are particularly interested in contributions that discuss the interdependencies of education and religion and their impact on prevalent systems of knowledge and practices of knowledge production.

The interrelated historical issues we would like to consider include—but are in no way limited to—the following four areas:

1. Transformation strategies and the production of new social knowledge

What strategies and means were employed to adapt to social and cultural changes? What role was attributed to received knowledge and practices—including not least religion and religiosity—in the field of education from the late eighteenth century on? What status did the state attribute to religion in general

and how did its agents perceive various religious groups in the context of education? How did such groups respond to and interact with a state that increasingly intervened in questions of education?

2. Cultural translation and languages of transformation

The concept of cultural translation is about not only linguistic transformation but also how forms, meanings, patterns, and practices are refined and reframed to meet new demands while relying on familiar concepts and notions. Which dimensions and modes of cultural translation were visible in the field of education and its transformation in the 18th and 19th centuries? What was translated, transmitted, and transformed? To what extent and in what ways did religion—and appeals to religious or other kinds of cultural tradition—facilitate the production of new social knowledge and cultural practices?

3. Religion and knowledge

The Enlightenment and the Haskalah questioned traditional religious authorities and their interpretation of the world. The ideas and ideals developed in these contexts were fundamental to pedagogical innovations and the emergence of modern science and scholarship. How did new concepts of knowing, including the hierarchies and orders they produced, impact what was understood as valuable and necessary knowledge? Who retained or gained authority over this knowledge and who was supposed to be able to acquire it?

4. Reason, virtue, and emotion

Reason, morality, virtue, and utility became crucial categories in debates about Jewish emancipation. How did expectations vis-à-vis Jews relate to broader developments, for example, to concepts of citizenship, education, and cultivation [*Bildung*], not to mention respectability? What role was attributed to purportedly universal ideas and concepts such as reason, freedom, and humanism? How did these ideas affect expectations regarding gender roles, emotions, and aesthetics?

The conference will be conducted in English, and the organizers expect to be able to cover the transportation and accommodation costs of conference participants. Please send a short abstract of your proposed contribution (no more than 500 words) together with a brief academic CV in a single PDF file to Mrs. Susanne Fabricius at fabricius@ghi-dc.org.

Deadline for proposals is November 15, 2017.

For questions regarding possible contributions, please contact Dr. Kerstin von der Krone (krone@ghi-dc.org).