KALEIDOSCOPIC KNOWLEDGE: ON JEWISH AND OTHER ENCYCLOPEDIAS IN MODERNITY

Workshop at the Simon Dubnow Institute, Leipzig, September 10–11, 2009. Conveners: Arndt Engelhardt (Simon Dubnow Institute, Leipzig) and Ines Prodöhl (GHI). Participants: Yaakov Ariel (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), Kirsten Belgum (University of Texas at Austin), Richard I. Cohen (Hebrew University, Jerusalem), Dan Diner (Simon Dubnow Institute/Hebrew University, Jerusalem), Arndt Engelhardt (Simon Dubnow Institute), Ottfried Fraisse (Simon Dubnow Institute), Dagmar Glaß (University of Bonn), Gershon D. Hundert (McGill University), Thomas Keiderling (University of Leipzig), Markus Kirchhoff (Simon Dubnow Institute), Ulrike Kramme (Simon Dubnow Institute), Ines Prodöhl (GHI), Bettina Rüdiger (German National Library, Leipzig), Martin Rüsch (University of Zurich), Dirk Sadowski (Simon Dubnow Institute), Barry Trachtenberg (University of Albany), Jeffrey Veidlinger (Indiana University, Bloomington), Philipp von Wussow (Academy Project at the Simon Dubnow Institute), Hansjakob Ziemer (MPI für Wissenschaftsgeschichte, Berlin).

Since the onset of modernity at the latest, the encyclopedia has been a medium through which communities have sought to reassure themselves of their own selfhood. Encyclopedias became an important locus of negotiation for the debate over what communities regarded as “worth knowing.” “Jewish” encyclopedias came into being in the nineteenth and early twentieth century as a reaction to so-called general or universal encyclopedias, which were, in fact, anything but universal because they were largely oriented toward national cultures. The general encyclopedia’s claim to universality served as a kind of foil for emphasizing distinctive national features and particularities, specifically with respect to the process of modernization. This international workshop on “Jewish and Other Encyclopedias” at the Simon Dubnow Institute in Leipzig aimed to analyze encyclopedias as constructs of particular processes of identity formation. Nevertheless, the workshop organizers proposed that the body of “Jewish” knowledge is more closely related to other “worlds” of knowledge than has commonly been assumed, owing to a particular feature of encyclopedic texts: the continual resumption of modes thought and knowledge that have periodically been considered passé and outdated. In contrast to other media, encyclopedic texts have a certain degree of persistence. This persistence is evinced, for example, by editions reissued over several decades.
without significant changes, and portions of text taken from other encyclopedias. The workshop asked, therefore, if the encyclopedia might be a kind of textual kaleidoscope. Do encyclopedic texts merely reorder the same contents of knowledge into new patterns? To what extent is the observation of recurrent textual building blocks diametrically opposed to the ambition of the encyclopedia to generate a collective sense of belonging? To what extent does the formation of identical or similar knowledge influence the negotiation of concepts of value that are valid beyond borders, or without borders? And in what way does the encyclopedia help us to negotiate our conceptions of the global order and “modernity”?

In the introduction, Dan Diner presented the concepts underlying various projects on the history of knowledge at the research institute in Leipzig. He argued that modern encyclopedias, especially in their alphabetical form, marked a transition from traditional forms of knowledge to a new canon.

The first panel addressed ideas of identity and modernity in regard to encyclopedias from different societies. Dagmar Glaß focused on encyclopedias from Egypt in the context of the Arab Renaissance of the nineteenth century, taking Butrus al-Bustani’s incomplete *Dai’rat al-ma’arif* (1876–1900) as an example. Glaß analyzed how the Western concept of modernity manifested itself in the Arab encyclopedias of the time by tracing the substantial influence and pressure exerted by the West on Arabic encyclopedic production. Next, Yaakov Ariel discussed the English-language *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901–06), the first modern Jewish encyclopedia, which would transform American Judaism into a global center of Jewish learning. He argued that the encyclopedia was crucial for putting Judaism on an equal footing with Christian groups in America. The third presenter, Jeffrey Veidlinger, also underscored the connectedness of modernity and self-understanding. He investigated the Russian-language *Evreiskaia entsiklopediia* (1908–13) within the context of the Jewish public culture movement after the 1905 Revolution. He argued that this encyclopedia marked a key moment in the creation of a distinct Judeo-Russian identity.

The second panel concentrated on how canons of knowledge have been shaped. How do canons arise, and who compiles them? Arndt Engelhardt showed that the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1928–34), published in Berlin in the interwar period, preserved a canon of common knowledge for European Jewish communities in transformation,
integrating secular elements into a tradition primarily characterized by sacred scripture. Addressing the question of how a scholarly canon is developed, Ottfried Fraisse concentrated not on a single encyclopedia, but on a certain author and his influence on the production of particular knowledge. Ignác Goldziher, a prominent Jewish Orientalist from Hungary, and a widely respected scholar at the turn of the twentieth century, wrote several entries on Islam for various German- and English-language encyclopedias, spreading a specific picture of Islam in Western society. Barry Trachtenberg spoke on Di algemeyne entsiklopedye (1932–66), which was supposed to be the first comprehensive encyclopedia in the Yiddish language. Its intended purpose—helping to craft a modern Jewish citizenry—gave way with the Nazi rise to power to a more particular goal: memorializing destroyed Jewish communities and promoting the resettlement of Jews in new centers.

The third panel analyzed the transformation and adaptation of encyclopedic knowledge, particularly in encyclopedias based on those published by the German publisher F. A. Brockhaus in Leipzig. Kirsten Belgum focused on the Jewish terminology in the 7th edition of Brockhaus’s Conversations-Lexicon and its English-language adaptation, the Encyclopedia Americana (1829–32). Both encyclopedias purveyed a socially distinguished form of cultural expression and served as repositories of information. Belgum highlighted this presentation of specifically Jewish cultural and religious knowledge to a predominantly non-Jewish readership across the Atlantic as part of the larger process of transatlantic cultural translation. Ulrike Kramme discussed Hungarian adaptations of the Brockhaus encyclopedia from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, focusing especially on the Jewish themes in these works. In the last lecture of this panel, Ines Prodöhl discussed the numerous foreign language adaptations of the “Brockhaus,” which enabled the transnational proliferation of the work throughout the nineteenth century. Taking these adaptations and the global flow of encyclopedic texts as an example, Prodöhl explored the analytical possibilities for understanding processes of cultural homogenization and heterogenization in Europe and North America.

In an evening lecture, “New History—Refined Memory,” Gershon D. Hundert provided insight into the making of the YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. He presented this encyclopedia as an up-to-date account of the history of the Jewish experience in Eastern Europe, presenting scholarship based on research in recently opened archives,
featuring diverse contributors, and attending to previously overlooked aspects of the field. The subsequent discussion centered on decision-making strategies for such a complex work, and specifically the question of what is included in, or excluded from, the encyclopedia.

The workshop’s final panel addressed the question of how editors of encyclopedias have negotiated knowledge. Bettina Rüdiger discussed the production of the unfinished *Allgemeine Enzyklopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste* (1818–89), initiated by Johann Samuel Ersc and Johann Gottfried Gruber. She argued that the editors aimed to produce a work that would encompass knowledge on values and identity, rather than provide practical information. Martin Rüesch then analyzed Pierre Bayles’s *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, relating the work to the author’s views on Jews and Jewish history. Rüesch engaged the difficult question of whether Bayle, who was famous for propagating tolerance, was sincere, or whether his tolerant stance was merely a beautiful façade. Finally, Dirk Sadowski presented the case of the early modern *Ma‘ase Twia*, a Hebrew compendium of knowledge first published in 1708. This encyclopedia sought to provide Jews in the time of Haskala with contemporary knowledge on the natural sciences. According to Sadowski, such “modern” knowledge was intended to enable the encyclopedia’s readers to intelligently participate in scholarly discussions with Christian interlocutors.

In his closing remarks, Richard I. Cohen compared encyclopedias to museums, focusing especially on forms of visibility. He argued that both Jewish museums and encyclopedias aspired to raise Jewish pride and foster a sense of belonging, while asserting the desire to present Jewish culture and history to the non-Jewish world in the classical spirit of the founders of the “Wissenschaft des Judentums” (the science of Judaism). Cohen highlighted the nature of Jewish visibility and the character of Jewish knowledge during the twentieth century.

Participants left the workshop with a better understanding of encyclopedias as products of their time, reflecting an occasionally distorted Zeitgeist. Encyclopedias continue to serve as a unique cultural space for developing concepts of values and norms. They also spread the standards of modernity to the world, thus multiplying them. Encyclopedias have always contained an invitation for readers to identify with their own society, and they proffer a catalog of suggestions on how to demarcate one’s own self and society from other societies.

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