

# REPLAYING THE DISAPPEARING FEMINIST ACT: JEWISH STUDIES AND THE POSTMODERN TURN

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I come from a training in political philosophy rather than in Judaic Studies. Although most of my work has been on Jewish issues and what I would call Jewish philosophy, as much as postmodernists want to break down disciplinary divisions, as you will see, for this paper in particular my political science background does make a difference.

Last winter I gave a paper at the Western Jewish Studies Association Conference that was held in Tucson on gender. It was titled "A Jewish Feminist Challenge for Moderns and Post Moderns."<sup>1</sup> I had been looking forward to that opportunity to present at an academic conference among Jewish feminists because I had sometimes felt out of sorts in my own political theory circles. In some places where the effects of postmodernism have lingered longer, I am at times viewed as nearly reactionary. I certainly appreciate the contributions of deconstruction, but my work has

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<sup>1</sup> "Jewish/Feminist/Queer: Identity Challenges for Moderns and Post Moderns," Western Association of Jewish Studies Conference on Gender, Tucson, April 1997.

usually gone by the name of multiculturalism. In my discipline, these two postmodernism and multiculturalism or identity politics are usually seen as opposing philosophical tendencies. One of the key factors of my position that distinguishes me as a Multiculturalist rather than a postmodernist is that, as a Jewish feminist, I have long insisted on reconstruction as well as deconstruction. Such a project placed me outside the briefly trendy postmodernist camp at least in my discipline; and despite my own never-ending critique of liberalism as a modernist discourse, it earned me this bizarre label of modernist.<sup>2</sup>

I took the opportunity at the Western Jewish Studies Conference to articulate for myself why not being post-modernist does not necessarily mean that one is a modernist. The paper articulated how such assumptions expose colonizing aspects of theory being done on the so-called behalf of the minority and the marginalized that continued not to listen to these groups speaking for themselves. Concepts and categories are imposed on minority discourses and, once they are then recognizable to those doing the imposing, are analyzed and condemned for being in the boxes into which they were philosophically forced.

I was pleased with the response by this group of Jewish feminists, and so looked to this paper at the AJS as a time to continue the train of thought. But when I imagined presenting to a mixed crowd of men and women, feminist Jewish Studies scholars and not necessarily feminist Jewish Studies scholars, very different aspects of the discussion became highlighted for me, and different problems demanded my attention. Today I instead focus on one of the recent reenactments of the ever-disappearing feminist. I should be more careful, perhaps about obscuring agency with my use of the passive “disappearing.” I’m afraid that in the postmodern turn in the Jewish world, the feminist is being “disappeared” (verb) again, and this time it is by Jewish scholars many of whom even probably mean to end totalizing oppressions within Jewish life.

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<sup>2</sup> Ie: Brettschneider, Marla. 1996. *Cornerstones of Peace: Jewish Identity Politics and Democratic Theory*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

When postmodernism was still the rage in certain parts of my discipline, I diligently studied this challenging and trendy approach to critical inquiry. Finding it helpful in a number of ways, as a Jewish feminist I had much fun with the ways that postmodernism crossed over and enhanced my own critical investigations of modernism. I never came to subscribe, however, to this view as a philosophical orientation. I am happy that the phase of the postmodern craze has largely past in my slices of academe. It seems that I was far from the only one impatient and frustrated with the often problematically apolitical read reactionary in current political discourse consequences of those adhering to the trendy stance. Perhaps if I had been schooled in Judaic Studies my experience would have been different.

I have no problem with, for example, Steven Kepnes' definition in his volume *Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age*, he writes, "By the term 'postmodern' I mean to designate a number of philosophical, social, and cultural transformations that have come together in the contemporary period and that include a movement away from the modern ideal of a universal rational culture and toward a multicultural reality that celebrates the value of the local and particular and attempts a new openness to premodern forms and motifs."<sup>3</sup> Although I would define multiculturalism slightly differently, Kepnes' rendition sounds a lot less like the postmodernism in my slice of academia and a lot more like what often got me into trouble for being a multiculturalist!

I remember a conversation I had with a man, about my age, nearly five years ago.<sup>4</sup> He is a super smart man whom I both liked and respected. He was still in graduate school at the time so I asked him about his work. He was doing Jewish studies and described his project as postmodernist. I was shocked. Jewish studies was one of the last places I expected or wanted to see postmodernism. Jewish life had often served as my personal antidote to the lingering postmodernism of my academic circles. I read in

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<sup>3</sup> Steven Kepnes, ed. 1996. *Interpreting Judaism in a Post Modern Age*. New York: New York University Press:1.

<sup>4</sup> Aryeh Cohen, personal communication.

Adi Ophir's article from Kepnes' volume<sup>5</sup> last year a bit that horrified me, and was reminded of it recently because in my preparations for this conference I went back to reread Kepnes' introduction, and there he quotes part of the same Ophir section, though Kepnes does so without comment. In a discussion of theology Ophir writes, "But whereas modernists who have killed God sought to replace Him, postmodernists look calmly at the corpse and care little about what is done with it." Ophir continues, "They are free of bad conscience and of the anxiety for finding substitutes." (186) That was exactly why I kept Jewish life as my private haven. I wanted to be with people who could unabashedly talk about justice flowing like water and righteousness like a mighty stream. The fascist overtone to postmodernism, I believe probably unselfconsciously captured in Ophir's comment, was one of the central reasons for my rejection of this mode. It is clear to me modernism ought to be over and done with, but I have no reason to lose feeling, to leave behind me all ethical guidance, not to go ahead with my albeit trained Jewish angst in the pursuit of a newly defined justice. This does not, however, make me a modernist.

My Jewish Studies student friend explained that he meant he utilized deconstruction as an analytical method as applied to ancient texts. Oh, I said, that was fine by me. After all, I met him in a havurah and we were all "deconstructing ancient texts." It didn't mean he didn't want to reconstruct anything; in fact, he was a major creative force behind the construction of this alternative Jewish community I loved. So now, perhaps I was unfortunate not to have been trained in Judaic Studies. This is what I thought we were all up to these days anyway, and here was this guy getting to do it as a living! Let me explain.

The we I just referred to was the shifting, cross-geographical communities of feminists, Ashkenazis, Mizrachis, Sephardis, queers, converts, leftists, progressive Zionists (remember this was still the 1980s) many of us lay or secular activists, though there are plenty of scholars and

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<sup>5</sup> Adi Ophir in Kepnes.

religiously oriented among us involved in making Jewish culture in our own alternative communities and engaging as Jews in multicultural coalitions with other minority and marginalized groups and anyone committed to the principled goals of social justice and radical democracy.

What we were, and I would say still are, up to was on the one hand protest and critique of our own specific Jewish community and larger hegemonic cultures, as well as, on the other hand, the creation of new cultural forms and the celebration of alternative modes of relationship. You see, a lot of what my colleagues in the academy were calling postmodernism was in many respects all too similar to the pretty standard feminism or Marxist informed dialectics we were practicing in and out of the academy.

Let me offer another anecdote here. A few Berks ago—I refer to the Berkshire Women’s History Conference that takes place every three years—I was having lunch one day with some friends including Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz and peers of hers. For those of you unfamiliar with this reference, Kaye/Kantrowitz is about twenty years my senior and is one of the founding generation of the kind of feminism and Jewish feminism we tend to work with today. She is also a close personal friend and as the still young grad student that I was, they had me “please explain all this postmodernism stuff to them.” So, to the best of my grad student ability, I explained this phenomenon to my own mentors and the creators of second-wave feminism. They were all furious. The response was, “what do they think we have been up to the past twenty years!”

These folks had long been “deconstructing” mythic and essentialist presumptions, heading straight for the silences and lapses in dominant narratives as a method to find minority voices and with what we learned from taking ourselves seriously, rebuilding life and thought from there. Once again the work of a diversity of minority and majority women, this time even inside the academy, was being appropriated by the still proverbial white men creating ever more old boy networks through whom they site in their written work and with who speaks at conferences.

Claiming to speak in the name of the oppressed “remainders”<sup>6</sup> of modernism, feminist work is almost never acknowledged in the genealogies with which they are careful to map their own ideas.

The truth for me is that there is no doubt that I have learned much from postmodern’s ruthless criticism of the natural and its proclivity for radical questioning. But, interestingly enough, I find myself in relation to postmodernism, much the way Marx describes his relation to what he termed Critical Utopian Socialism.<sup>7</sup>

Postmodernists will hate this comparison, but bear with me for just a moment, and remember that as a lover of Martin Buber citing the following is not without irony for me as well. For everything nasty Marx had to say about these folks, and he was pretty nasty, he pointed out that their strength was to be found in their “critical element.” He continues, “They attack every principle of existing society. Hence they are full of the most valuable materials...” For Marx, of course, he gaged value in terms of what would be in the service of his revolutionary hope, the working class. He says that “although the originators of these systems were, in many respects, revolutionary, their disciples have, in every case, formed mere reactionary sects.” Though I would not take things quite that far, the point is, that what I also appreciate from postmodernism is its critique of modernism. But like Marx’s polemic against the critical utopian socialists, I find postmodernism’s relation to the future, to the actual social transformation out of injustice and into new, hopefully, more just, relations more than lacking, and at times, as mentioned above, simply reactionary.

Perhaps returning to the reference to feminist theorists will be most instructive from within my slice of academe. There was a big debate among theorists about the benefits of postmodernism to feminism. Some claimed that postmodernism is actually a hindrance to coherent feminist social change. In response, postmodern feminists such as Wendy Brown

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<sup>6</sup> I use Bonnie Honig’s term here. See 1993 *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Marx, Karl. 1967. *The Communist Manifesto*. New York: Penguin Books: 114-118.

point out the similarities between multiculturalist feminism and their own.<sup>8</sup>

The response of the women at my lunch during the Berks is only true up to a point, they would reply. Much of what postmodernists are doing has been done by feminists for many years (as others would say that one only has to read postmodern literature to see the influence of Marx). But the postmodernists distinguish that kind of feminism as, either an historically outmoded form of politics, as Jodi Dean does,<sup>9</sup> or explicitly as a reactionary foundationalism that developed merely in reaction to the disorientation of postmodernity. In the face of decentralization, this line of thinking goes, and politics as a "terrain of struggle without fixed or metaphysical referents" (Brown 1995, 37), postmodernists point to what they call the reactionary assertion of identities as a flight from politics. As you see, each side accuses the other of being reactionary for its "flight from politics." In an otherwise highly nuanced work, Brown will time and again list as polar opposites the differences between multicultural feminists and postmodernists. Her dichotomizing characterizes these "other" sort of feminists, such as Nancy Hartsock, Christine De Stephano and even Patricia Hill Collins, as opting for certainty over freedom, truth (which is her word for the fixed and unchanging) over politics (which is her word for flux), for "separable subjects armed with the established rights and identities" over "shifting pluralities."

But perhaps this is the key point of confusion. Jewish feminist and 'postmodern' work does claim identity and forms of subjectivity but it is colonialist to reduce such to modernist categories. Feminist and Jewish conceptualizations of selfhood are hardly apolitical, separative rights bearers and utility maximizers.

The point is, that kept on course by a postmodernist aversion to naturalized and essentialist categories, I think the strands of

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<sup>8</sup> Brown, Wendy. 1995. *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Dean, Jodi. 1996. *Solidarity of Strangers: Feminism After Identity Politics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

contemporary multiculturalism, by which I mean feminists, Jews, people of color, queers, dialecticians, etc., can do a better job because they are not afraid to work within the framework of democratic community. This is one of the central factors that seem to me to distinguish Jewish works from the postmodernist works in my discipline: Jewish works still move within and expect a communal framework. Further, we might reject modernist notions of justice, but we are not afraid to speak in the language of justice and remain action-oriented. It is true that the postmodernism of my disciplines seems a different strain than that which is being embraced in some area of Jewish studies and, which from within my slice of academia, appears to be a misnomer. But my problem with the increasing tendency for Jewish institutions to jump on the bandwagon of postmodernism is not this, or that it has pretty much passed through the trendy gathering places of minority studies, women's studies, politics, philosophy and anthropology long ago.

I am glad that Jewish scholars are moving away from, as Kepnes discusses, fixed foundations of the Jewish soul, and other unitary conceptualizations. But I suppose I take such things for granted to some degree as a secular Jewish feminist, trained in the secular academy and in particular in critical political philosophy. Every time I hear Jews doing work they call post-modernist they claim the critical terrain of deconstruction, but they also often in the same line continue to claim the reconstructive movement of tikkun, repair. And so my problem with this is that these scholars seem to do so as if it is a brand-new method. As if Jewish feminists haven't been doing basically the same thing now for over twenty years. The only time acknowledgment is made to this feminist genealogy is when expressly feminist work is included among the men's contributions. What I would appreciate, then, from today's discussion is if anyone would distinguish for me between what they refer to as postmodernism in Judaism and feminist work in the contemporary period so that we can be clear about genealogies and intellectual acknowledgment and end the current Jewish version of the disappearing (verb) feminists.